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Afghanistan-Pakistan Ties and Future Stability in Afghanistan

By Elizabeth Threlkeld and Grace Easterly

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CONFLICT ANALYSIS & PREVENTION

ABOUT THE REPORT

Informed by Afghan and Pakistani expert interviews, this report explores the historical dynamics and future trajectory of the Afghanistan-Pakistan relationship and its impact on Afghan stability. After identifying key drivers of conflict and connection between the two sides, it analyzes how the bilateral relationship could affect future outcomes in Afghanistan. This research was supported by the United States Institute of Peace.

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Cover photo: Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, center, and Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan, both wearing face masks because of the COVID-19 pandemic, inspect the honor guard before a news conference at the Presidential Palace in Kabul, Afghanistan, on November 19, 2020. (Photo by Rahmat Gul/AP)

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Summary

Three scenarios in Afghanistan are possible in the wake of the US military withdrawal: negotiated settlement, civil war, or Taliban takeover. In each, the Taliban is likely to emerge as the most influential party. How and how quickly it secures its position, as well as how much funding the United States and partner nations provide the Afghan government, will shape Afghanistan's future. So, too, will the extent of support the Taliban receives from external sources, principally Pakistan.

Afghanistan and Pakistan have a long history of tense relations defined by five recurring drivers: sovereignty concerns, security interests, geopolitical dynamics, cross-border ties, and connectivity and trade. Together, these dynamics will shape future prospects for stability in Afghanistan and the broader region.

Given that conflict is almost certain to intensify after US and international forces withdraw, battlefield developments will take center stage. The Afghanistan-Pakistan relationship is likely to further deteriorate, and vitriol on both sides could foreclose on any remaining opportunities to reach a negotiated settlement. Bilateral ties will likewise influence security, political, and economic dynamics in the medium to long term, either after the conflict reaches a stalemate or after a new government takes shape.

Under such circumstances, a positive relationship with Pakistan could go a long way in fostering stability and development. The opposite is a much likelier outcome, however, given the deeply held grievances on both sides compounded by the ongoing conflict.

By acknowledging and working to address one another's security and sovereignty concerns patiently through dialogue, Afghanistan and Pakistan stand the best chance of building on their cross-border ties for the benefit of regional stability and the well-being of their citizens.

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, right, meets with Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan at the Presidential Palace in Kabul on November 19, 2020. (Photo by Mohammad Ismail/AP)

Introduction

Efforts to bring an end to the Afghan war have focused largely on the interests of three parties—the Afghan government, the Taliban, and the United States. All three are directly involved in the conflict and have an immediate stake in its prosecution and ultimate resolution. Ahead of the August 31, 2021, withdrawal of US and international troops, uncertainty surrounds the question of Afghanistan's future stability and prospects for the stalled peace process.

Central to both is a fourth actor, Pakistan, which has played a key, if less overt, role in the conflict from its position on Afghanistan's eastern border. Former US President Donald Trump reportedly requested Pakistan's assistance in bringing the Taliban to the table in 2018, and lauded Pakistan's role in "advancing the Afghanistan peace process" when intra-Afghan negotiations began nearly two years later.[1] This outreach highlights Pakistan's deep ties to the Taliban, to which it has given safe haven and support for much of the past two decades. Many senior Taliban remain based in Pakistan, where their families live, they own property and businesses, and injured fighters receive medical care.[2]

This reality is not lost on Afghanistan's leaders or its people, who have suffered tremendously at the hands of the Taliban and who hold Pakistan responsible for enabling the ongoing violence. Many Afghans question why Pakistan maintains its ties to the group and has not done more to pressure the Taliban to reduce violence, though Pakistan denies having that leverage. As Afghan President Ashraf Ghani argued in 2015 remarks in Washington, DC, "The problem, fundamentally, is not about peace with Taliban. . . . The problem is fundamentally about peace between Pakistan and Afghanistan."[3]

The resulting strain on bilateral relations, though severe, is not unique. Over the last seven decades, a tenuous and often grudging coexistence has emerged between Pakistan and Afghanistan, propelled by both internal and external developments. These include Pakistan's formation during the partition of British India, which Afghanistan refused to recognize; a dispute over their shared border; alignments with competing sides during the Cold War; US- and Saudi-backed proxy warfare; the emergence and Pakistan's sponsorship of the Taliban; and the post-9/11 era, during which both countries were aligned with the United States, even while Pakistan maintained its ties to the group.

Together, these episodes reveal enduring themes in the bilateral relationship that will impact future Afghan and regional stability. They include sovereignty concerns, security interests, geopolitical dynamics, cross-border ties, and connectivity and trade. As foreign troops withdraw and prospects for a peaceful settlement dim, these themes will become all the more important to building future stability in Afghanistan and limiting the reemergence of proxy conflict in the region. Indeed, the current war emerged from these dynamics and has further shaped the bilateral relationship over the past twenty years.

Achieving near-term stability in Afghanistan and ensuring its long-term sustainability are a chicken-and-egg challenge. Only by recognizing the tensions and ties that have historically defined Afghanistan-Pakistan relations can policymakers hope to foster a durable resolution in Afghanistan and stability in the region. Many of these tensions are structural and deeply held, however. They are unlikely to be resolved in the current environment of violence, hedging, and mutual distrust. Trying to address them without due sensitivity could, in fact, further prolong instability.

The situation in Afghanistan—and with it the Afghanistan-Pakistan relationship—is likely to worsen in the short term. A prolonged civil war or full Taliban takeover now appears more likely than a negotiated settlement. Whatever government ultimately emerges will face a relationship with Pakistan driven by the same themes that have historically defined bilateral ties. Should both sides work to address these deep-seated tensions while building on cross-border connections, the relationship could become a source of stability and growth. If, however, one or both sides allow these tensions to distract from positive outreach, the result is likely to be continued or intensified mistrust and serious consequences for regional security.

Some argue that Afghanistan and the wider region would be better off were the United States and other third parties to abandon hope of working with Pakistan or of improved Afghanistan-Pakistan ties. Such voices rightly recognize Pakistan's destabilizing support for a group responsible for killing tens of thousands of Afghans, a group that threatens to enforce draconian restrictions on human rights.[4] The challenge of this prescription is that any such attempt to foster stability in Afghanistan would remain vulnerable to spoiler actions by a Pakistan intent on securing its western flank against both separatist threats and its regional rival India. Given the lack of a viable way to insulate either Afghanistan or the region from destabilizing interference, a more realistic (if not ideal) option would be to seek a middle ground that acknowledges Pakistan's threat perceptions and works toward mutually beneficial accommodations.

To inform efforts toward a more secure, sustainable outcome, this report analyzes underlying sources of tension in the Afghanistan-Pakistan relationship and identifies openings for engagement in the context of three future scenarios. It is informed by nearly thirty Pashto- and English-language interviews with political, military, and business leaders; civil society representatives; and journalists and analysts from both Afghanistan and Pakistan—both based in their respective capitals and living in the border region—as well as with US and international officials and outside analysts. It also draws on a literature review of key works on the bilateral relationship, its role in regional stability, and its impact on populations straddling its contested border.

Enduring Tensions

The British Raj and the Emir-led Afghan government fought three wars in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The two sides agreed to delineate separate spheres of influence along a 1,660-mile border that bisected Pashtun-majority areas. The **1893 Durand Line agreement** proved and remains controversial in Afghanistan.

After **Pakistan's independence in 1947**, relations were characterized by border disputes, the emergence of core bilateral security and sovereignty concerns, progress on trade agreements, and limited state control over Pashtun-majority border regions. Over the next two decades, the states found themselves on opposite sides of the Cold War geopolitical divide.

Beginning with **the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan**, Pakistan leveraged its western border region as a staging ground to provide logistical, material, and financial support—including billions from the US and Saudi governments—to largely Pashtun mujahideen groups against Soviet forces. In the process, it sowed the seeds for conflict, created a war economy, and disrupted social structures.

The Afghan **Taliban's assumption of power in 1996** ushered in close Pakistani ties to the Taliban. India, meanwhile, provided a range of assistance to opposition groups seeking to unseat the group. Despite international concern over the Taliban's severe policies, Pakistan saw the group as its best option for assuring its security interests.

Following the **9/11 attacks in 2001**, Pakistan distanced itself from the Taliban but continued to provide the group covert assistance and safe haven. Both Kabul and Washington blamed Islamabad for enabling the subsequent resurgence of the Taliban and al-Qaeda from across the border. In recent years, Pakistan has played a significant role in negotiations by facilitating meetings between Taliban and Afghan government officials and third parties.

Thematic Analysis

Throughout Afghanistan and Pakistan's shared history since the colonial era, five recurring themes have emerged. Three—sovereignty concerns, security interests, and geopolitical dynamics—have prevented the relationship between the two neighbors from warming beyond a cold tolerance defined by significant mistrust on both sides. The other two—cross-border links and connectivity and trade—offer glimpses into opportunities for both sides to build on should ties improve.

SOVEREIGNTY CONCERNS

Both Afghanistan and Pakistan are sensitive to real and perceived violations of sovereignty. Islamabad is most concerned with Kabul's refusal to recognize the colonial-era Durand Line as an international border and its associated outreach to Pakistani Pashtuns who live along it. Kabul, in turn, objects to Islamabad's interference through both its support for proxy groups and its efforts to shape policy orientations in Kabul.

Afghanistan's support for Pashtun separatism predates the creation of Pakistan in 1947 and has waxed and waned since then. In the years immediately after Pakistan's independence, Kabul provided assistance to pro-Pashtunistan Pakistani leaders.[5] Its initial refusal to recognize Pakistan at the United Nations intensified threat perceptions in the new state.[6] Until at least the mid-1950s, in fact, some Afghan officials backed the creation of a confederation to include Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Pashtunistan.[7]

Pakistan's attempts to unite as a nation in the face of ethnic, regional, and social divisions were controversial in Afghanistan. In 1954, efforts to consolidate Pakistan's western half into what was called the One Unit Scheme—designed to counteract the influence of East Pakistan's larger population—had unintended consequences. Because the policy's elimination of provincial boundaries effectively incorporated the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) into Pakistan proper and negated its autonomous status, Afghanistan saw it as a threat to Pashtun sovereignty. This, along with Pakistani government development projects near the Durand Line, led to diplomatic crises in the 1950s and the early 1960s and sparked armed clashes and border closures.

The two sides did reach a near agreement on the Durand Line issue in the 1970s during talks between Pakistani Prime Minister Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto and Afghan President Daoud Khan. A confluence of factors had facilitated the opening, including Daoud's desire to reduce Afghan dependence on the Soviet Union and Iranian efforts to broker improved Afghanistan-Pakistan ties.[8] As Daoud explained to US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in a 1976 meeting in Kabul, Pakistan's humanitarian assistance in the wake of several "natural calamities" and related cessation of "all hostile propaganda" was "very important to us and . . . a substantial move."[9] The deal, however, did not survive Daoud's assassination in 1978.

Despite its insistence on formalizing the Durand Line, Pakistan has leveraged the porous border to suit its strategic aims. Islamabad grew acutely concerned about secessionist threats following the 1971 independence of Bangladesh and began arming and training Afghan Islamist fighters in order to counter pro-Pashtunistan factions in Kabul.[10] In the 1980s, during the Soviet-Afghan War, Pakistan refused a demand from Kabul to close the border to prevent mujahideen fighters from crossing, emphasizing that the Durand Line

Pakistan Army troops patrol the fence on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border in Khyber District, Pakistan, on August 3, 2021. (Photo by Anjum Naveed/AP)

"could be transgressed in the name of regional security."[11] Such assertions fueled Afghans' grievance that Pakistan pursues its interests in Afghanistan without regard for sovereign Afghan territory.

Afghan politicians have long feared domestic blowback for even an implicit acknowledgment of the Durand Line as an international border, and have instead further reinforced public sentiment in their statements against Pakistan. Not even the Pakistan-backed Taliban regime was willing to compromise on the issue, despite multiple attempts by Pakistan to win formal recognition in the 1990s.[12] This expansive notion of Afghan sovereignty extends to Kabul's statements supporting the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM)—a Pakistani human rights group centered in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan—drawing accusations of internal interference from Pakistan's leaders. Yet Afghan political opinion is divided: some Afghans view support for Pashtunistan as a discriminatory government priority.[13]

Although continuing to leverage the Durand Line to accommodate the passage of Taliban fighters, Pakistan has recently hardened its border in response to security threats. After a series of military operations in the border areas in 2014, Islamabad sought to lock in security gains by constructing a two-layer fence along the entire length of its borders with Afghanistan and Iran.[14] The fence has improved security in certain areas but also disrupted cross-border communities, drawn protests from Afghans, and attracted cross-border firing.[15] Islamabad also extended constitutional jurisdiction over the adjacent FATA region and incorporated it into a neighboring province. The official response from Kabul, however, has been relatively mild—likely given the many other challenges Afghanistan faces.

Despite current tensions in the relationship, interviewees suggested that an opening for dialogue on sovereignty sensitivities, including the Durand Line issue, may be developing.[16] Weary from conflict and focused on more immediate problems, many Afghans have come to tacitly accept the border. Afghan leaders might have also learned that rejecting its legitimacy does not inspire significant international support. A Pakistani interviewee, meanwhile, argued that Pakistan has lowered its expectations over the last twenty years and will be more wary of overt political interference. Although old habits die hard, especially amid conflict, the latent potential for reduced sovereignty tensions is worth exploring should greater stability ultimately emerge in Afghanistan. A realization on both sides of the Durand Line of the costs of sovereignty infringements could lead to policy changes benefiting those most affected by these mutual threat perceptions—the communities along it.

SECURITY INTERESTS

Pakistan views its security interests in Afghanistan predominantly through the prism of its regional rival and neighbor India. To avoid an encirclement scenario in which India's influence extends from Pakistan's eastern to western borders, Islamabad has sought to develop "strategic depth" in Afghanistan by backing friendly governments in Kabul while limiting New Delhi's involvement in the country.[17] Afghanistan faults Pakistan for much of the violence it has suffered over recent decades because of Pakistan's proxy activities. Pakistan in turn accuses Afghanistan and India of facilitating militant attacks along its western border.

Whereas Afghan-supported Pashtun separatism dominated Pakistan's security concerns after independence, the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan brought a more pressing challenge. The Soviet Union, a close partner of India, presented both an unfriendly force on Pakistan's western flank and a threat to Pakistani territory.[18] These concerns in part motivated Pakistan's US- and Saudi-backed proxy campaign, which funneled billions in aid, equipment, and training through Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) to seven mujahideen groups.[19] Seeking to ensure that a friendly force would come to power in Afghanistan, Islamabad steered the majority of this funding to four fundamentalist groups it viewed as pro-Pakistan.[20]

Pakistan initially supported Hezb-e Islami in the civil war that followed the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, but switched its allegiance to the Taliban as the group rose to prominence in the mid-1990s.[21] The Taliban maintained close ties with Pakistan and remained hostile to India both because of religious differences and because of its provision of military and financial support to the competing Northern Alliance, a multiethnic coalition of opposition political and military leaders.[22] Taliban-controlled Afghanistan also hosted a range of Pakistan-backed militants training for operations in Indian-administered Kashmir, helping Islamabad maintain its subconventional assets despite US pressure.[23] In addition to securing influence in Kabul, Pakistan's military and ISI calculated that their support for the Taliban would ultimately force surrounding states India, Russia, and Iran to accept the group and give Pakistan added leverage.[24]

The Bush administration's partnership with the Northern Alliance in the post-9/11 invasion of Afghanistan saw the United States rely heavily on those "whom Pakistan most mistrusted," setting off Pakistan's threat perceptions.[25] Pakistan gained significant influence and resources by participating in the US-led war on terror, though it maintained ties with the Taliban and other militants as a hedging strategy. As the Taliban insurgency intensified, Afghan President Hamid Karzai repeatedly pointed his finger at Pakistan for waging a proxy war against its regional rival without regard for the impact on security in Afghanistan.[26]

The bilateral relationship came under strain both from Pakistan's failure to prioritize its neighbor's security over competition with India and from alleged Indian and Afghan support for anti-Pakistan militants. The

Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Durand Line
Adapted from artwork by Rainer Lesniewski/Shutterstock

emergence of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) insurgency in Pakistan's western border regions—spurred in large part by Pakistan's own military intervention in the traditionally autonomous region, decades of support for militant infrastructure, and heavy-handed security tactics—led Islamabad to accuse Kabul of sheltering militants across the Durand Line.[27] Specifically, Pakistani authorities allege that India carries out terrorist attacks within Pakistan via its consulates in Jalalabad and Kandahar in coordination with Afghanistan's intelligence service.[28] Although Pakistani officials have gained confidence in internal security in recent years, the prospect of increased conflict in Afghanistan, the reemergence of the TTP, and the prospect of Indian influence in Kabul continue to drive regional security concerns and bilateral tensions.

Water security has also emerged as a growing bilateral security issue with regional implications. In 2018, the Afghan construction of the India-funded Shahtoot Dam on the Kabul River sparked concerns in Pakistan of downstream water shortages.[29] Afghan officials argue that the project is vital for securing a stable power supply, but Pakistan views India's investment as an additional vulnerability, eliciting fears that New Delhi could wield its influence in Kabul to restrict Pakistan's water supply during a crisis.

Interviewees from both Pakistan and Afghanistan nonetheless recalled some positive examples of security cooperation as potential starting points for future dialogue. Several noted, for example, that Afghanistan remained neutral during Pakistan's wars with India in both 1965 and 1971. Indeed, Kabul reportedly provided private assurances to Islamabad that it would refrain from intervening along the Durand Line so that Pakistan could more freely deploy troops to the ongoing fighting. Another interviewee explained that Afghanistan had recently become more sensitive to Pakistan's concerns over Indian interference, even going so far as seeking to engage New Delhi on the issue, though unsuccessfully to date. Still another argued that Pakistan's security leadership had come to reject strategic depth as an actionable concept.

GEOPOLITICAL DYNAMICS

A third theme shaping Afghanistan-Pakistan relations over the decades has been the broader geopolitical dynamics of their strategically central region. Both states have found ways to leverage external involvement to their advantage, though to the detriment of bilateral ties, particularly in Pashtun-majority border areas.

The British Empire's approach to Afghanistan and what is now Pakistan during the colonial era has had an enduring impact on the two countries' geopolitical roles and governance structures. After two unsuccessful Anglo-Afghan wars in the 1800s, the British began treating Afghanistan as a buffer state separating the Raj from Russia and used an economic embargo to pressure Afghan Emir Abdur Rahman into signing the Durand Line agreement.[30] The Pashtun-majority tribal areas immediately east of the Durand Line served as a second defensive zone and remained a semi-autonomous buffer region after the subcontinent regained its independence in 1947.

The presence of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, enabled by the Pakistan-backed Taliban, speaks to the global impact of regional security calculations. Pakistan likewise shaped external involvement in its decision to ally with the United States yet maintain links to Taliban fighters.

Cold War alignments over the next several decades developed in response to both sides' existing security interests and injected tension into the bilateral relationship. Afghanistan's rejection of the Durand Line and its support for Pashtunistan precluded close relations with Pakistan and its allies, including the United States. Pakistan joined the US-led Southeast Asia Treaty Organization and Central Treaty Organization in the mid-1950s, ostensibly as a bulwark against communism but also to buttress its resource-poor military against the Indian threat.[31] This spurred Afghan fears of its neighbor's growing capacity, leading Kabul to abandon its non-aligned position and accept assistance from the Soviet Union in the 1950s, including political and alleged financial backing of Pashtun separatist groups.[32] The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and ensuing US and Saudi support for proxies similarly built on Pakistan's backing of friendly Islamist groups.

The 9/11 attacks and US and NATO intervention in Afghanistan followed a similar pattern, both shaping and responding to existing Afghanistan-Pakistan ties. The presence of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, enabled by the Pakistan-backed Taliban, speaks to the global impact of regional security calculations. Pakistan likewise shaped external involvement in its decision to ally with the United States yet maintain links to Taliban fighters as a hedging strategy. US influence in the region, meanwhile, has affected local economic, political, and security dynamics, especially in Afghanistan. Washington has provided Pakistan with approximately $34 billion in civilian and military assistance since 2001, and nearly $145 billion in reconstruction assistance to Afghanistan in that period.[33] This massive influx of funds has fundamentally reshaped Afghanistan's economy and further strengthened Pakistan's powerful security establishment. The human cost of war runs to more than 170,000 killed in Afghanistan and reportedly nearly 70,000 in Pakistan.[34] Despite this shared experience, the war has only further strained bilateral ties.

Although third parties have historically played a destabilizing role in the region, they have also helped resolve bilateral conflicts. Iraq, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia played this role after a 1955 incident when Afghan protesters attacked Pakistan's embassy in Kabul, as did Iran in facilitating talks on the Durand Line between Daoud and Bhutto in the 1970s.[35] Following the end of the Soviet-Afghan War in 1989, the Geneva Accords saw the United States and Soviet Union serving as signatories and guarantors to facilitate the Soviet withdrawal. Although both parties reneged on their pledges to stop external support, the agreement did recognize the role that outside powers played in conflict dynamics.[36]

External pressure can also help limit traditional irritants. Pakistan has faced intense pressure from the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) since June 2018, when it was placed on the list of Jurisdictions under Increased Monitoring for taking too little action against terror financing and money laundering.[37] In the context of a broader economic slowdown, the risk of demotion to the so-called blacklist has prompted Pakistan's leaders to demonstrate compliance, including by reining in some proxy groups.[38] The result, according to one interviewee, could be the best chance in forty years for bilateral progress if Afghan security improves as Pakistan remains under pressure from external sources and seeks to redeem itself internationally.

Numerous interviewees cautioned that motivations for bilateral outreach could be based more on meeting US demand signals for improved Afghanistan-Pakistan relations than on a serious desire to engage.[39] Despite the performativity of these interactions, however, they

could still provide a platform to build on should the security situation stabilize. Similarly, the withdrawal of US troops and likely future reduction in funding could prompt engagement between the two sides and force concessions on challenging issues.

CROSS-BORDER TIES

Afghanistan-Pakistan relations have long been driven by cross-border people-to-people relationships, including the movement of refugees as well as familial, commercial, and communal ties spanning the Durand Line. From the perspectives of Kabul and Islamabad, the Pashtun population living along the border presents both a mutual opportunity and a vulnerability. Pakistan has historically leveraged its border region as a staging ground for militants, largely excluding so-called tribal area populations from political participation and influence. Although Pashtuns from the so-called settled areas of Pakistan are relatively well represented in the state's civilian and military power structures, those from areas closer to the border are not. Nonetheless, border populations on both sides have long shaped and resisted state policies affecting their communities.

Historically, Pashtun and Baloch communities along the Durand Line enjoyed close ties due to their proximity and kinship links. Under British and later Pakistani rule, members of border communities could cross the Durand Line freely. Since Pakistan's recent imposition of passport and visa requirements for border crossings and the construction of the border fence, such movement has been curtailed. According to a 2017 estimate of daily traffic at the Torkham border crossing, the new restrictions reduced what had been an average of twenty thousand travelers per day to as few as two to three thousand Afghans.[40] In addition, authorities in Pakistan regularly close crossings in response to security concerns and in retaliation for Afghan protests and violence against border installations. Such disputes are often resolved between border officials, though Afghan officials are reportedly under government orders to avoid any written agreements lest they be taken as recognition of the Durand Line.

Despite this formalization of the border, Pakistan has also taken steps to reduce friction for travelers, including offering visas on arrival for medical patients and allowing online visa applications. Even though some Pakistani authorities frame such steps as significant concessions, travelers complain about the complexity of the applications for those who rely on access to their neighboring country and are unfamiliar with navigating immigration processes. Travelers also report widespread corruption among police and border officials demanding bribes for permission to cross, particularly on the Pakistani side.

Another key dynamic linking populations between Afghanistan and Pakistan is the cross-border flow of refugees. The 1979 Soviet invasion pushed a wave of refugees into neighboring Pakistan and Iran, with more than four million Afghans displaced into what were then North-West Frontier Province, FATA, and Balochistan.[41] The US intervention in Afghanistan and ensuing insecurity spurred additional outflows, from which an estimated 1.4 million registered and one million unregistered Afghan refugees remain in Pakistan.[42] Estimates vary, but a large percentage of this population is made up of second- and third-generation refugees born and raised in Pakistan. Despite Pakistan's policy of birthright citizenship, these individuals have been unable to secure either citizenship or permanent residency in Pakistan and instead receive temporary permission to remain without formal access to education or property ownership, among other restrictions.[43] Unregistered refugees have even fewer legal protections.

With the increase in security incidents in the early 2010s that Pakistani officials attributed to Afghan-based groups, public sentiment turned against Afghan refugees. This intensified in the wake of the killing of some 140 schoolchildren in the 2014 Peshawar Army Public School attack, which Pakistani authorities alleged was planned in Afghanistan.[44] Subsequent police crackdowns on Afghan refugee populations forced tens of thousands to cross back into an unstable

Afghanistan—a move that left many disillusioned with the country they had come to see as home.[45] Some, including Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan, have proposed extending citizenship to Pakistan-born members of the refugee community, but such offers have faced pushback within Pakistan.[46] Notably, cross-border movement has ensured that large numbers of Afghans, including elites, have lived in Pakistan. Although their familiarity could prove helpful in building bilateral ties, this issue has also become a point of friction. Many Afghans fault Pakistan for its harsh treatment of refugees even as officials in Pakistan resent the lack of recognition Pakistan has received for its decades of hospitality.

TRADE AND CONNECTIVITY

Opportunities for trade, investment, and cross-border engagement—the final recurring theme in Afghanistan-Pakistan relations—could provide immense benefits to both sides via connections to Central Asia, the Arabian Sea, and India as well as bolster the broader bilateral relationship. To date, threat perceptions have limited the prospects for economic engagement, and both sides have used trade access as leverage to secure bilateral concessions. In the absence of more regulated trade, border communities have prospered from the illicit exchange of goods and narcotics, without which many would struggle to make ends meet.

Modern bilateral trade relations date to 1950, when an initial transit agreement went into effect. The Afghan Transit Trade agreement replaced it in 1965 and remained in place until the 1990s, when Pakistan suspended trade access in an attempt to influence ongoing fighting between the Rabbani government and the Taliban. In response, both parties strongly criticized the move, as did traders from border communities.[47] In 2010, the two countries negotiated the more robust Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA) with urging from the United States and support from the United Nations. The agreement enacted counter-smuggling initiatives; reiterated a commitment to strengthening both countries' customs facilities; enabled them to use each other's rail, road, and airport infrastructure on certain routes; and provided for the one-way transfer of Afghan goods to India via the Wagah border crossing.[48]

In practice, however, interviewees from the trade and business communities on both sides concurred that compliance with the agreement is still lacking. Despite guaranteed access on set routes throughout Afghanistan and Pakistan, interviewees reported, both sides have curtailed this movement such that traders have to stop in the first major cities they reach after crossing the border—Jalalabad and Kandahar in Afghanistan and Peshawar and Quetta in Pakistan. Afghan traders are thus unable to transit Pakistan to India as outlined in the agreement, a friction point between the two sides. Afghan traders also complain of costly documentation they are required to show at the port of Karachi and when crossing the border, over and above what is necessary under APTTA. Traders from both sides highlight corruption among border officials and police, who often demand bribes from those transiting. Asked why implementation of the agreement is so limited, one interviewee argued that its provisions neither reflect ground realities in the two countries nor account for broader regional tensions.

Efforts to renegotiate APTTA have slowed, in part due to Pakistan's reluctance to allow two-way trade with India, requiring multiple extensions to the existing framework.[49] Pakistani officials have recently highlighted their interest in infrastructure projects such as the Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan railway, the long-delayed Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-Iran oil pipeline, and the Central Asia-South Asia (CASA-1000) power transmission line, all of which depend on connectivity with Afghanistan.[50] The prospect of increased bilateral trade between Afghanistan and India via Iran—already significant despite US sanctions and sure to increase should they be lifted—gives Pakistan added incentive to work toward trade with Afghanistan. One interviewee familiar with the negotiations argued that this pressure had led Pakistan to take steps to address

Afghan border police stand guard at the Torkham border crossing between Afghanistan and Pakistan on April 4, 2020. (Photo by Rahmat Gul/AP)

the concerns of Afghan traders, including by working to clear a significant cargo backup at the port of Karachi and opening the Torkham border crossing to twenty-four-hour trade.

For communities on both sides of the Durand Line, meanwhile, trade has long been a lifeline amid limited economic prospects. Pashtuns from this region leverage their cross-border ties to dominate the trucking industry, and local traders often do not differentiate between licit and illicit trade. In a telling example, 71 percent of respondents from two sampled Afghan border towns in an Asia Foundation study reported that "business activity in their community depends entirely or mainly on cross-border trade."[51] The high incidence of illicit trade along the border is historically rooted in Pakistan's import-substitution industrialization policy in the years following independence, with high tariff rates incentivizing the smuggling of consumer goods across the Durand Line.[52] Estimates of losses to Pakistan's formal economy range from $1 billion to $3 billion annually.[53] For many border communities, however, this income is vital.

Illicit trade between the two countries has long included drug smuggling. The explosion of mujahideen-controlled poppy production in Afghanistan in the 1980s and 1990s led to the development of more established narcotics smuggling routes.[54] US-led drug eradication campaigns in the mid-2000s cut into this income source, particularly on the Afghan side, where efforts to prevent poppy cultivation left residents without viable alternative incomes.[55] Opium cultivation has since rebounded, providing a funding source not just for local communities but also for the Taliban, other militant groups, and officials.[56]

[Pakistan] is increasingly seeking to focus on geo-economic connectivity to Central Asia over traditional geopolitical interests. In theory, such connectivity could create conditions for broader economic engagement to drive a positive dynamic between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

In what is in part a bid to change international perceptions of Pakistan and its role supporting the Taliban and other groups, the country is increasingly seeking to focus on geo-economic connectivity to Central Asia over traditional geopolitical interests.[57] In theory, such connectivity could create conditions for broader economic engagement to drive a positive dynamic between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Tensions between the two countries, however, have regularly interfered in both their formal trade and local exchange economies. This includes Pakistan's use of border closures as a tactic to force concessions from geographically isolated Afghanistan.[58] Although these closures generate major losses for the predominantly Pashtun trading community, they can also revitalize lucrative smuggling routes: illicit trade reportedly tripled after licit routes closed in 2017.[59]

Given the overriding interest in cross-border security and the influence of broader regional tensions on the bilateral relationship, such closures are likely to continue, complicating efforts to grow geo-economic ties under conditions of uncertainty. Indeed, the recently reported Taliban capture of the key Chaman border crossing speaks to the importance of such access points, both as strategic locations and sources of income.[60]

Future Scenarios

Together, these five themes will shape future prospects for stability in Afghanistan and the broader region. Given that conflict is almost certain to intensify after US and international forces withdraw, battlefield developments will take center stage. The Afghanistan-Pakistan relationship is likely to further deteriorate under such circumstances, and vitriol on both sides could foreclose on any remaining opportunities to reach a negotiated settlement. Bilateral ties will likewise influence security, political, and economic dynamics in the medium to long term, either after the conflict reaches a stalemate or after a new government takes shape. Under such circumstances, a positive relationship with Pakistan could go a long way in fostering stability and development. The opposite is a much likelier outcome, however, given the long history of tensions between the two sides compounded by the ongoing conflict.

The sections that follow examine three future scenarios that could unfold in Afghanistan over the coming two years: negotiated settlement, civil war, and a Taliban takeover. While predictions are particularly challenging to make regarding a situation as volatile as that in Afghanistan, these are offered in order to further illustrate the complexity and impact of Afghanistan-Pakistan ties on regional stability. Exploring the range of possible outcomes also illustrates the varied impacts they could have on the bilateral relationship and how that relationship, in turn, could shape future trajectories.

In each scenario, the Taliban is likely to emerge as the most influential party in Afghanistan, though how it does so and how rapidly, as well as the level of funding the United States and partner nations maintain, will shape the way forward. Likewise central to the question of future stability is the prospect of interference by outside actors sponsoring competing factions in the event of a security breakdown or intensified great power competition. Given Pakistan's threat perceptions, Indian involvement in Afghanistan will also impact Afghanistan's stability as well as the bilateral relationship.

SCENARIO 1: NEGOTIATED SETTLEMENT

A successful negotiated settlement presents the most promising but least likely future scenario. The internationally led peace process has at best stalled, and the imminent withdrawal of foreign forces leaves little opportunity for talks to succeed. The Taliban, believing itself to be an ascendant power, is unwilling to make concessions, as is the Afghan government, which seeks to maintain its waning influence. As conditions continue to deteriorate, the uncertainty will encourage both Afghan and Pakistani leaders to hedge against unfavorable outcomes to the detriment of bilateral ties. Should a negotiated settlement nonetheless materialize and bring an end to the conflict, bilateral ties would prove critical in generating stability over the long term.

Afghan elites are likely to respond to the current uncertainty with a combination of defensive tactics and quiet negotiations. Leaders are reconstituting militia forces similar to those that dominated the civil war three decades ago as they seek to secure their interests along tribal and ethnic lines. Others are likely to enter into private talks with the Taliban should the group's ascendency become more certain. Pakistan's security establishment, meanwhile, has grown concerned about the potential for spillover violence and a refugee influx. Pakistan has thus far failed to stem the fighting through negotiations and is instead relying on defensive border reinforcements and closures while maintaining its support for the Taliban.

Russian presidential envoy to Afghanistan Zamir Kabulov, left, speaks to members of the Taliban delegation prior to their talks in Moscow on May 28, 2019. (Photo by Alexander Zemlianichenko/AP)

A negotiated resolution remains unlikely, but it is not impossible even at this late stage. The Taliban could choose to come to the table after having demonstrated battlefield dominance to give its victory a pastiche of international legitimacy. The United States and others have warned that a government imposed by force would not receive much-needed financial assistance.[61] The international community's support is also required to lift bilateral and UN Security Council sanctions on Taliban officials, a long-standing demand.[62] Indeed, the Taliban has said that it does not plan to take Kabul by force and reportedly will present a written peace proposal in talks in the near future, likely motivated by these considerations.[63] Although such statements should not be taken at face value, the group's military strategy suggests that it could seek to force the government's capitulation by cutting off the flow of funds and supplies rather than an all-out assault.

The support of Pakistan and other regional governments could further incentivize the Taliban to come to the table, but Pakistan's involvement risks jeopardizing Afghan government participation. Authorities in Kabul are wary of Pakistan's direct attempts to broker a deal, particularly after the recent breakdown in diplomatic ties between the two sides.[64] According to one interviewee, Afghan public opinion has turned strongly anti-Pakistan, limiting options for politicians who might otherwise seek engagement across the Durand Line. This reluctance reportedly led to the recent cancellation of a planned conference in Pakistan with a range of prominent Afghan figures.[65] Such talks could help pave the way for a settlement in Doha but appear unlikely to take place given ongoing bilateral tensions.

The preferred outcome of Pakistan's security establishment is a negotiated settlement dominated but not

monopolized by the Taliban. Should the Taliban lead an interim governing structure with some multiethnic representation, Pakistan could secure continued influence in Afghanistan and mitigate the downside risks that emerged during the 1990s. Several interviewees recognized that this outcome would offer the greatest chance of both limiting the Taliban's imposition of controversial human rights restrictions and gaining international support.

Given that the group would still face competitors within the Afghan government and thus have reason to rely on outside support, this outcome would also minimize the risk that an empowered Taliban would distance itself from Pakistan. It could also contain—though not eliminate—the emboldenment effect likely to emerge from a Taliban battlefield victory. Pakistan's establishment is deeply concerned that such a scenario would further the potentially destabilizing influence of Pakistan-based clerics and religious parties and spur attacks by anti-Pakistan militants inside Pakistan's borders.[66]

This outcome would also open doors to the geo-economic prospects Pakistan seeks via Afghanistan in Central Asia and reduce the international pressure it faces for its support to the Taliban, in this scenario a legitimate political actor. Although sensitivities over India's future role would remain acute, a member of the Afghan parliament related in an interview, the emergence of a stable Afghanistan in which Islamabad feels it has a seat at the table could drive it to pursue trade, connectivity, and people-to-people initiatives in order to balance or outbid similar overtures from New Delhi. Finally, this outcome would limit the likelihood that Pakistan would face cross-border attacks from the newly reconstituted TTP, which is again becoming a significant threat to its interests.[67] Not only would Afghanistan's internal security be more assured under this scenario, but Islamabad would also be better able to coordinate with Kabul on border management and counterterrorism strategies.

For Afghanistan's political elites, this scenario would involve making concessions to the Taliban in exchange for averting even more devastating conflict—a difficult trade-off that could lay the groundwork for further bilateral engagement with Pakistan. Some interviewees noted that those close to President Ghani remained opposed to any such change in government structure, but others acknowledged that an interim government role for the Taliban could be a worthwhile concession should it improve stability. Implementing this arrangement would likely spark a fierce—and potentially destabilizing—competition for political influence among elites. Given the declining security situation the country now faces, however, even halting progress toward an integrated government would be an improvement.

Such an outcome could also mitigate Pakistan's concerns over irredentist claims, limiting a traditional irritant in the relationship. While Taliban recognition of the Durand Line remains an unlikely prospect given the group's previous stance on the issue, Taliban leaders are unlikely to highlight the contested border in public venues. This could lower temperatures between both sides, mitigate threat perceptions, and potentially create space for dialogue. Finally, factoring in a likely reduction in US and other international assistance to Afghanistan over the long term, Afghan leaders would have incentives to maximize support and investment from Pakistan and other neighboring countries. Such economic engagement is most likely to appear in the context of a positive bilateral relationship and could create conditions for further improvements.

For Afghan and Pakistani border communities, this outcome could facilitate greater access to cross-border trade and travel. Afghan refugees in Pakistan would be more likely to return to an increasingly stable Afghanistan and could play a bridging role given their ties to both countries. An improved security situation could also create space for security agencies to reduce their reliance on covert activities and proxy sponsorship, potentially limiting one of the main sources of

Despite Islamabad's misgivings over a full Taliban victory and the threat of international pressure, accelerating such an outcome through increased assistance could help contain the spillover effects that would result from a prolonged civil war.

grievance and instability in border communities. Such a policy shift would be challenging to implement after Pakistan's decades of reliance on these groups, the extent to which its military and bureaucracy benefit from such ties, and its prevailing threat perceptions regarding Afghanistan-based anti-Pakistan groups, including the TTP. The chances of making such a shift are greatest, however, in a context in which both sides feel their security interests are more assured.

SCENARIO 2: CIVIL WAR

A prolonged civil war is the scenario most likely to unfold given the Taliban's rapid takeover of significant areas of the country as well as its cohesion and military effectiveness. Even though a full Taliban victory could ultimately result, such an outcome appears less likely in the near term given given the consolidation of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, international funding and possible air support, and the constitution of militia forces.[68] These factors could impede the Taliban's advance, particularly in strategic areas and key cities, including Kabul.

Afghanistan-Pakistan ties would suffer under this scenario despite the countries' shared imperative to quell the spread of instability. Both sides would trade increasingly strident accusations of support for proxies, a pattern that is already emerging.[69] Afghan elites would be too focused on security to maintain regular official engagements with Pakistan, though prominent figures would likely make quiet appeals to their neighbor in attempts to secure their individual interests. Competing Afghan power brokers would vie for control, and the government would struggle to maintain power amid security force defections.

Pakistan would confront both an influx of Afghan refugees and the prospect of violence spilling across the border. Although the newly constructed border fence would provide more control than was possible during previous influxes, the full border closure threatened by officials seems unlikely given the international pressure Pakistan would face to host Afghans.[70] Pakistan's security establishment would likely screen the incoming refugees for security risks and could attempt to contain them within certain areas. Any delay or perceived lack of hospitality would prove controversial within Pakistan's Pashtun community, which is particularly sensitive to the suffering of co-ethnic Afghans and profiling by security forces.[71]

Facing these risks, Pakistan could step up its support for the Taliban while attempting to maintain its positive relationship with Washington and status as a key player in regional diplomacy. Despite Islamabad's misgivings over a full Taliban victory and the threat of international pressure, accelerating such an outcome through increased assistance could help contain the spillover effects that would result from a prolonged civil war. In return for support, Pakistan could seek the Taliban's cooperation along the border in limiting the spread of violence within Pakistan and containing the refugee influx. This logic is apparent in an implicit quid pro quo recently suggested by a Pakistani official: that Pakistan will not give the US base access to target Afghanistan and expects the Taliban to prevent the TTP and other groups from carrying out attacks in Pakistan.[72]

This policy would not be without risks, however. The threat of economic repercussions, including through FATF and other international mechanisms, would be particularly worrisome to Islamabad given its dependence on external borrowing and its ongoing attempts to attract investment. Pakistan would likely watch China's approach to Afghanistan and could seek to exploit any daylight that emerges between Washington's

and Beijing's policies and their tolerance for proxy support. Indeed, China's recent interactions with the Taliban illustrate the space that such outreach could create for Pakistan.[73] Should Beijing signal approval for additional support for the Taliban in an effort to reestablish stability, even by force, Pakistan could feel it has a freer hand to support the group with the backing of its great power partner.

For border communities, a civil war scenario would bring once again displacement from homes, disruption of lives and livelihoods, and increased influence of militant groups. Those living in the border areas of Pakistan could expect an increase in refugees, who would be burdensome to host at a time when economic opportunities remain limited and inflation is high. Pakistan's security forces would likely reinforce their presence along the Durand Line to control cross-border movements, and the state could increase its reported reliance on controversial pro-government militias to maintain law and order.[74] This additional military and state-backed presence would further inflame grievances within border communities, such as those motivating supporters of the PTM.[75] This, echoing historical dynamics, could renew concerns among Pakistani officials regarding Pashtun separatism.

This scenario is clearly not conducive to Afghanistan-Pakistan relations in the immediate term, but could pave the way for renewed contacts should a hurting stalemate develop. The Taliban is likely to hold the upper hand in such a scenario, ensuring that Islamabad remains a key interlocutor in negotiations to bring the conflict to an end given its ties to the group. If Afghan leaders feel they are in a position in which bilateral engagement is the only way to secure their interests, resolve an impasse, or lock in gains made, it could provide an opening for talks. Similarly, if Pakistan is concerned by the spillover effects of the violence and its impact on domestic stability and economic prospects, it could have an added incentive to engage with Afghan leaders to bring the situation under control.

SCENARIO 3: TALIBAN TAKEOVER

If, in the wake of the international troop withdrawal, the Taliban rapidly gains control over key cities, including Kabul, the result is likely to be a discontinuation of US and partner-nation funding and a denial of international recognition amid mass movements of refugees and insecurity. This eventuality is less likely to unfold than a prolonged civil war scenario, assuming that US and international support for Afghan security forces remains relatively steady over the short to medium term, though it appears a more probable outcome than a negotiated settlement. Afghanistan-Pakistan ties under this scenario would be particularly relevant given Pakistan's links to the Taliban.

From Pakistan's standpoint, although an ascendant Taliban in Afghanistan would provide some protection from both Indian influence and Pashtun separatism, this scenario would have downsides. Should the Taliban enforce restrictions on human rights and impose a theocratic-style government, Pakistan would face demands both externally from the United States and other governments to pressure the group against such policies and internally from clerics and religious parties to adopt similar practices. Particularly if Washington identifies alternative over-the-horizon routes to carry out counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan, it will have a freer hand to hold Pakistan accountable for its support to the Taliban without access-related dependence.

Even a rapid Taliban takeover is likely to result in cross-border movements of refugees and raise the risk of spillover violence. Such an outcome would invigorate like-minded groups within Pakistan and more broadly, threatening domestic and regional stability in a neighborhood with three nuclear powers. The risk of principal-agent problems emerging with unauthorized attacks taking place in Indian-administered Kashmir and elsewhere would be heightened in the wake of a Taliban propaganda victory, and such groups could likely expect greater

operating space in a Taliban-controlled or a partially Taliban-controlled Afghanistan.

At the same time, Islamabad's leverage with the Taliban would be more limited under this outcome. The Taliban would likely attract support, both overt and covert, from regional countries such as Iran and Russia seeking to protect their interests in Afghanistan. Although Pakistan would remain the group's most significant supporter given historical, logistical, and religious links, this association would be less influential in a context in which the Taliban has diversified its international ties. If stability improves, a former Pakistani ambassador to Afghanistan suggested, more Taliban members could move their families and businesses out of Pakistan to gain greater scope to act independently. Their doing so could allow the group to counter the public narrative within Afghanistan that it is beholden to Pakistan and to begin to increase its domestic legitimacy.

Despite the mutually beneficial relationship between Pakistan and the Taliban, many Taliban members resent Pakistan for its cooperation with US-led operations, its perceived mistreatment of their leaders, and the undue influence they see it as holding over their actions. The greater freedom of action the Taliban would gain under this scenario could provide an opening for resistance to Pakistani pressure or even reprisal actions, including via the TTP and other groups. Although the risk of lost leverage is most acute for Pakistan in a Taliban takeover, a similar dynamic could apply in the first two scenarios should the group attain greater independence and influence, rendering Pakistan relatively less able to shape its actions.

Were the Taliban to become more independent in ways that Pakistan's security establishment did not anticipate or accept, the result could be destabilizing for Afghanistan and detrimental for Afghanistan-Pakistan ties. Pakistan's confidence that its strategic interests will be protected rests on the assumption that the Taliban will both support those interests and prevent groups more sympathetic to India and Pashtun nationalism from gaining ground. If Pakistan's security establishment believes this is no longer the case—for example, if the Taliban allow Pashtun nationalist factions to make irredentist claims, pursue outreach with India, or fail to contain cross-border attacks—it will have few alternative options beyond using its remaining influence with the group while attempting to maintain positive relations.

Although Pakistan is likely to lose leverage over the Taliban, several structural factors make a full break between the two unlikely. First, many Taliban members maintain associations with Pakistan-based *madaris* and clerics, providing Pakistan's establishment a way of exerting influence via religious channels regardless of location. Second, the eventuality some Afghan interviewees described—whereby Pakistan would sponsor a new proxy group in lieu of an unfaithful Taliban—likewise seems improbable given the challenges involved in generating a similarly effective force. The Taliban, too, would be unlikely to fully cut ties with Pakistan both because of the assistance Pakistan offers the group and to hedge against future contingencies in which Pakistan's support would again be required. Third, given Afghanistan's landlocked geography, Pakistan will retain its ability to exercise leverage over a potential Taliban administration through its control of trade and transit links. Finally, the close relationship between ISI and the Haqqani Network, including via Taliban deputy leader Sirajuddin Haqqani, provides Pakistan more secure influence over the group that is likely to endure.[76]

COMPLICATING FACTORS

Certain dynamics present potential complicating factors in both Afghanistan's future stability and the broader bilateral relationship. Although structural in nature and unlikely to be resolved, these challenges can be managed to a certain extent.

Afghan health ministry workers unload boxes of the first shipment of five hundred thousand doses of the AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine made by the Serum Institute of India, donated by the Indian government to Afghanistan, on February 7, 2021. (Photo by Rahmat Gul/AP)

India

One major challenge to improved Afghanistan-Pakistan relations in these scenarios is the role India would play, either as a partner in development assistance or as an actor seeking to protect its security interests. In the first scenario, a negotiated settlement in which Afghanistan achieves greater stability through a ceasefire and political settlement, the need for investment and development assistance would be acute. India has provided more than $3 billion in support to Afghanistan since 2001—the most of any regional country—in the form of transportation and infrastructure funding, health and humanitarian projects, and institutional capacity-building initiatives.[77] This assistance will continue to be badly needed in Afghanistan in the context of likely reductions in US and other international assistance, which today funds between 75 and 80 percent of total public expenditures.[78] The United States has recognized India's "constructive contribution" to economic development in Afghanistan and can be expected to continue welcoming such support in order to sustain a fragile peace.[79]

This assistance also risks inflaming Pakistan's threat perceptions. Although Islamabad has acknowledged India's role in Afghanistan, this stance merits skepticism given Pakistan's traditional suspicions. Should the Islamabad security establishment perceive India to be meddling in Afghanistan through its assistance programs, it could covertly work to counter such efforts. The result, according to a former ambassador, could be renewed insecurity as Afghanistan struggles to emerge from conflict, potentially negating the benefits of the support. Statements of concern from Pakistan could also aggravate sovereignty-related sensitivities in Afghanistan to the extent that Islamabad is seen as pressuring Kabul on its foreign policy.

Of greatest concern to India would be the risk that the Pakistan-backed militant groups Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed, both of which have a presence in Afghanistan, would gain influence and carry out attacks on Indian targets in Afghanistan or even in India proper.

India's reported recent outreach to the Taliban presents another complication in the future regional picture. Although India has had contacts with the Taliban since the 1990s, New Delhi's alleged renewed engagement suggests that it recognizes the Taliban's likely ascendency and is looking to hedge its bets. Because the US withdrawal is imminent, New Delhi feels pressure to open communication channels to secure its interests directly even as it maintains its support for the Afghan government. Pakistan, in turn, views these overtures with concern and seeks to secure the Taliban's continued loyalty.

Despite this outreach, India will likely respond to intensified conflict in Afghanistan by providing support and assistance to Kabul as well as to northern factions as it did in the 1990s.[80] Political and geographic constraints render Indian boots on the ground highly unlikely and suggest New Delhi will instead coordinate with countries such as Iran and Russia to secure its interests. Of greatest concern to India would be the risk that the Pakistan-backed militant groups Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed, both of which have a presence in Afghanistan, would gain influence and carry out attacks on Indian targets in Afghanistan or even in India proper. In response, India might either attempt to take action directly against the groups in Afghanistan via intelligence assets or press the United States to do so. Pakistan, in turn, would react strongly to any Indian-backed intervention, risking potential escalation while likely increasing its proxy support. Pakistan could also launch security operations across the Durand Line against groups such as the TTP, which it alleges receives Indian support, fanning the flames of conflict and damaging the Afghanistan-Pakistan relationship.

One final dynamic in assessing India's impact on Afghan stability and the future Afghanistan-Pakistan bilateral relationship is the prospect of improved India-Pakistan ties. Although the brief opening for dialogue that emerged in early 2021 appears to have closed, the possibility that both sides could come back to the table bears consideration.[81] Even a limited thaw could create space for greater bilateral cooperation across the Durand Line, particularly if Pakistan were to allow two-way trade for Afghan goods with India as a starting point. This shift is unlikely and would not alleviate other points of tension, including ethno-nationalist and Durand Line–related sovereignty concerns, but it could lay the groundwork for a more positive dynamic in which other points of friction might be addressed.[82] Conversely, should stability in Afghanistan deteriorate, competing Indian and Pakistani security interests would likely derail their bilateral engagement.

Regional Competition

States across the region with a stake in Afghan stability—among them Iran, Russia, China, and the Arab Gulf States—would likely feel compelled to increase their involvement should conditions in Afghanistan deteriorate. Despite growing competition among great powers and their regional partners, third parties have thus far been relatively unified in support of political settlement negotiations under the Doha Process. Should parallel or competing diplomatic tracks emerge, this dynamic could complicate diplomatic efforts, risk greater instability in Afghanistan, and reduce incentives for Afghanistan-Pakistan engagement. Afghan elites, local power brokers, and Taliban leaders could forum-shop among international parties for support, confusing the negotiating process and fueling more division.

If violence intensifies, regional third parties would likely be tempted to become more involved militarily and financially should they face high numbers of Afghan refugees or see the potential for Afghanistan-based terrorist

groups to launch attacks on their soil, a former ISI director general said in an interview. Bilateral engagement between Afghanistan and Pakistan would take a back seat to these third-party interventions and not contribute to stability in the context of ongoing fighting.

A related dynamic that could complicate both the Afghan peace process and Afghanistan-Pakistan relations is competition among great powers, especially the United States and China. In Afghanistan, the security interests of both have so far largely aligned, preventing their broader rivalry from interfering in efforts to reach a political settlement.[83] Both Washington and Beijing have engaged in talks with the Afghan government and the Taliban and have participated as third parties in various negotiations.

If relations between the United States and China deteriorate to the point that Afghanistan becomes a site of competition, the result could be destabilizing both for peace prospects and for regional stability. In this context, China could ramp up support for the Taliban to stave off the threat of terrorism spillover, especially among its Uyghur population, while seeking to embarrass the United States in the process.[84] The United States in turn could work against nascent Chinese investment in Afghanistan, including Belt and Road Initiative attempts to connect Afghanistan and Pakistan. This dynamic could jeopardize Afghanistan-Pakistan relations because each side would deepen ties with its influential partner—the United States for Afghanistan and China for Pakistan. This would mirror the destabilizing dynamic of the Cold War era, when external rivalries split the two sides and exacerbated regional conflict.

Dynamics in Afghanistan could also drive division in Chinese and US approaches, given that both would support negotiations under the first future scenario but diverge in their responses to the second and third. Although the United States has committed to supporting the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces after the withdrawal of international forces and would likely continue doing so in a civil war, China has already begun hedging against insecurity on its borders by publicly engaging with the Taliban.[85] China has long been wary of emboldening its Muslim populations or exposing itself to risk from extremist groups. It could, though, calculate that the risk of allowing a vacuum to develop through a civil war would be greater than facilitating a Taliban takeover for the sake of stability. Such a strategy would see the United States and China on opposing sides of the conflict, fueling violence and intensifying Afghanistan-Pakistan tensions, given the latter's ties to China.

Recommendations and Policy Implications

The recommendations and discussion of policy implications for Afghanistan-Pakistan ties that follow are relevant to both Pakistani and Afghan officials and wider audiences involved in the bilateral relationship, as well as to US policymakers engaged in efforts to reach a stable outcome. Many of these recommendations are drawn directly from interviews with individuals in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Implementing these proposals will likely prove difficult. Those familiar with the long history of the bilateral relationship will point to instances when similar efforts have failed. Their successful implementation will depend on political will and conditions on the ground. Although none is a panacea or capable of bringing the relationship to the level of aspired "brotherhood" that Afghan and Pakistani leaders rhetorically highlight, each recommendation represents a potential step forward should conditions allow. If stability continues to deteriorate, these recommendations may become untenable until the situation improves. To the extent that some level of outreach can be maintained even under difficult circumstances, however, those latent ties could unlock prospects for future Afghan and regional stability.

AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN

Hold direct track 1 discussions. High-level officials should engage directly rather than rely solely on track 2 engagements to maintain relations. Existing mechanisms, including the Afghanistan-Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity (APAPPS), provide a useful framework but have been underused to date. Should negative public opinion make bilateral engagement on sensitive issues politically infeasible, talks on less controversial issues, including economics, drug interdiction, and refugees, could be more tenable. Although regular track 1 talks are unlikely to continue in a civil war scenario, they should be pursued to the extent possible until a more stable outcome develops.

Hold inclusive track 2 talks. Regular contacts at the track 2 level are equally important and can be less controversial. They build familiarity, road test ideas, and maintain open lines of communication. They should include Afghans and Pakistanis from diverse backgrounds and sectors to ensure consideration of a wide range of perspectives, including those from border areas most directly affected by tensions in the bilateral relationship. Although track 2 talks have most impact when held in tandem with track 1 discussions, they can help maintain connections even in the absence of official contacts.

Include influential Pashtun representatives. The shared language and culture of Pashtuns on both sides of the Durand Line presents an opportunity for trust building. Concerns within Pakistan's security establishment over Pashtun nationalism can limit the positive impact of including such voices in negotiations, however. To manage these concerns, talks at both the track 1 and track 2 levels should include influential Pashtun representatives with ties to mainstream political parties and security agencies, including members of the ruling Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province. These participants could leverage cross-border ties and roles within Pakistan's key institutions to connect both sides while minimizing separatist

On April 4, 2020, Afghan municipal workers prepare tents for the first coronavirus quarantine camp for Afghan refugees using the Torkham border crossing to return from Pakistan. (Photo by Rahmat Gul/AP)

concerns. Given anti-Pakistan sentiment in Afghanistan, the inclusion of Pashtun representatives could also provide cover for Afghan politicians to engage.[86]

Plan to manage controversy and disputes. Talks can succeed only if participants foster an environment of open dialogue and establish in advance a mechanism to resolve disagreements. Participants should pledge to keep discussions private, avoid leaks in the media, and seek to limit inflammatory statements from those in their governments opposed to dialogue. Although some stray voltage is inevitable, both sides should disavow those views publicly to maintain space for dialogue. Rather than risking disagreements derailing talks, both sides could also agree to follow the dispute resolution mechanism developed in 2018 under APAPPS with engagement at a senior enough level to avoid delays from bureaucratic red tape. Given that incentives to pander to domestic constituencies with divisive rhetoric will grow in the context of increased instability, this recommendation will be key in such conditions.

Acknowledge core issues. For decades, bilateral relations have been held hostage to the security and sovereignty concerns that drive mistrust. Rather than either sidelining difficult issues in hopes of first building momentum through confidence-building measures (CBMs) or attempting to resolve them directly at the outset, the two sides should find a middle ground of acknowledgment without expectations. Just as important as the issues themselves are the deep-seated resentments that have developed over the past several decades. Discussions focused on building understanding and generating empathy could help lay the groundwork for progress without immediate pressure to find resolutions, especially until stability improves.

Focus on bilateral topics. Although still challenging, discussions on bilateral issues that do not immediately involve Pakistan's regional rivalry with India are more likely to bear fruit. Topics include the shared impacts of climate change; the narcotics trade; and the status, potential regularization, and prospective return of Afghan refugees in Pakistan.[87] Confining initial discussions to topics that do not directly challenge either state's sovereignty or security concerns could help build momentum. These talks could facilitate the return of some refugees and regularization of others, coordination on drug interdiction, and cross-border cooperation on mitigating climate impacts. Such talks are also more likely to succeed if undertaken in an atmosphere of increased stability.

Explore border management options. Conventional wisdom holds that the Durand Line is a third rail in Afghanistan-Pakistan relations that, if raised, will shut down dialogue. Some Afghan interviewees acknowledged, however, that the border is now a fact on the ground given Pakistan's border fence, a mainstreamed FATA, and formalization of visa requirements. Afghanistan is beset with other challenges and maintains its irredentist claims mainly as leverage against its more powerful neighbor and for domestic political consumption. Were Afghanistan to offer its private, de facto acknowledgment of the Durand Line in exchange for a commitment from Pakistan to limit its support of proxies, facilitate transit, and work toward a softening of the border, the two sides might begin to reduce the salience of the Durand Line and sovereignty tensions in the relationship.[88] Given the sensitivity of this issue, it is best pursued if an opening for negotiations emerges rather than in the context of increased instability.

Regularize military-to-military engagement. Bilateral security coordination has been mainly at the tactical level, not extending to strategic discussions. Meetings tend to occur in response to border incidents rather than on a regular, formal basis. Although Afghanistan's security forces lack the bandwidth to match Pakistan's force deployment along the Durand Line, the importance of the border to both sides' security interests merits more regular, structured contacts.[89] These talks would be difficult to maintain should instability increase but would provide an important channel for deconfliction and crisis de-escalation.

Pursue increased intelligence sharing. Given the mistrust between the two sides' intelligence services, intelligence sharing has thus far been limited. Although a proposed intelligence memorandum of understanding in 2015 provoked public backlash, the November 2020 Joint Vision Document called for "reenergizing" intelligence sharing on "enemies of peace."[90] Both sides could also follow through on their 2018 commitment under APAPPS to establish Ground Coordination Centers along the border for intelligence sharing.[91] Such exchanges would be more challenging should instability increase, though they could allow for discussion of mutual threats including Islamic State-Khorasan Province.

Signal good faith through domestic policies. Pakistan's harsh treatment of its Pashtun population along the Durand Line both inflames the sentiments of those within Afghanistan sympathetic to Pashtun nationalism and raises doubts about its sincerity in bilateral outreach. Given that this dynamic is harmful to Afghanistan-Pakistan relations and that the repression of Pashtun rights in Pakistan is concerning of its own accord and could foster instability, Islamabad should refrain from such heavy-handed tactics. Any undue restrictions on incoming Afghan refugees should likewise be avoided for the same reason. Pakistan, in turn, views expressions of support for groups such as PTM from Afghanistan as examples of its neighbor's destabilizing interference in its domestic affairs. In the interest of encouraging improved bilateral relations, Afghan leaders should be restrained in such comments despite their domestic political utility. These recommendations apply equally in the context of either relative stability or instability, though implementation will be more challenging should the security situation further deteriorate.

Cooperate on postconflict reconstruction. Pashtun-majority areas of Pakistan including Swat and the former FATA have endured instability over the past two decades, and local government officials and civil society members have gained experience managing and recovering from a host of related challenges. These individuals could share lessons learned with their local counterparts in Afghanistan on issues including deradicalization and reintegration as well as security-sector, land, and other governance reforms that will be needed as Afghanistan begins its recovery from decades of conflict. Such an initiative would be timely should relative stability be achieved, though cross-border counterparts could engage on local conflict management in the context of increased instability.

Build momentum through confidence-building measures. Simultaneous to these more sensitive discussions, both sides should consider introducing a range of CBMs to both generate trust and drive demand for future engagement. Indeed, the Pakistan-Afghanistan Parliamentary Friendship Group—a promising initiative that has cultivated productive working relationships at the bilateral level—has already developed a range of initiatives.[92] Although challenging in the context of increased conflict, they should be maintained to the extent possible in order to keep lines of communication open.

- **Trade.** Both sides should work toward easing frictions on traders operating within their countries and facilitating access to third-country markets. Reversing the restrictions on goods passing beyond entry points in both countries would be a useful first step, as would removing unnecessary taxation and paperwork that traders are required to show beyond APTTA requirements. Both could also commit to limiting unilateral border closures and using notification mechanisms under APTTA should closure be required. In the immediate term, the recent Taliban takeover of the Afghan side of the Chaman border crossing makes bilateral engagement on trade much more challenging though no less vital for coordination at remaining crossing points.
- **Investment.** To facilitate investment, Islamabad could further streamline the investor visa application process, introduce policies allowing Afghans to open Pakistani bank accounts and access credit, and work to identify cross-border investment projects to ensure benefits flow in both directions. It could also create investment opportunities for individuals in the Afghan refugee community, many of whom already own businesses but face regulatory hurdles because of their immigration status. Kabul, likewise, could take steps to improve its regulatory environment to encourage investment, particularly if the security situation improves and bilateral trade drives increased demand.
- **People-to-people exchanges.** Pakistan can take a number of steps to foster people-to-people ties, including continued improvements to its visa facilitation process, expanded visa-on-arrival processing, electronic *rahdari* cards to Pashtun border communities, and additional scholarships for Afghan students. Although demand for travel by Pakistanis to Afghanistan is limited, Afghanistan could reciprocate as stability improves. Both sides could coordinate and expand on a sports diplomacy initiative to, for example, hold matches between cricket teams in both countries.[93] Cultural exchanges through joint performances by Afghan and Pakistani artists and cross-border religious engagements could likewise help desecuritize the relationship and foster mutual understanding.
- **Military and security exercises.** Pakistan's military could both renew its offer to host Afghan service members in its academies and staff colleges and expand opportunities for regular military-to-military engagement via training programs and exercises.[94] This could include participation by Pakistan's police and border security officials (particularly the Frontier Corps), who are experienced in counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations after years of operations in the former FATA.

UNITED STATES AND OTHER THIRD PARTIES

Encourage without encroaching. The United States and other third parties should encourage Afghanistan and Pakistan to engage bilaterally but do so without interfering or creating a dynamic in which either is participating only to score points internationally. This outside interest can help keep engagement on track when talks slow or an unrelated development threatens progress. Third parties should be patient in encouraging this engagement, however, accepting that discussions on long-standing tensions will take time and succeed only if both sides participate freely, driven by their own interests.

Press for India-Pakistan dialogue on Afghanistan. Should back-channel contacts between India and Pakistan restart, both sides could productively engage in a quiet dialogue on their roles in Afghanistan.[95] This question is likely to be a point of friction that could further sour relations between Islamabad and New Delhi rather than a bridge to improved ties, making attempts to head off future conflict especially useful. Mistrust will remain, but a private outline of mutually understood parameters for future involvement could limit tension and provide an outlet for addressing inevitable disagreements.[96]

Explore options to verify commitments. Given the prevailing mistrust between the two sides, the United States or another third party could serve as a guarantor of commitments made during negotiations. This role brings with it significant challenges and, if not outlined appropriately, could force the United States to referee disputes that would be better resolved bilaterally. To the extent that a more limited verification role is viable given US intelligence and diplomatic capabilities, it should explore options to serve as a neutral clearinghouse for information in limited circumstances between the two sides while setting expectations about the extent of its involvement. Housing such a function under UN auspices might increase its perceived neutrality and effectiveness.

Anticipate and mitigate spoilers. Given the potential for tensions to complicate or foreclose on bilateral ties, the United States and other third parties should work to preempt such developments by focusing on five issues in particular:

- **Bilateral breakdown.** At a time when Afghanistan and Pakistan both have an immediate interest in preventing conflict escalation, public accusations and name-calling are a damaging distraction from the task at hand. The United States and third parties should push hard on leaders in both capitals to contain bilateral tensions and prevent the recent breakdown from further complicating efforts to reach a settlement.

- **Jaish-e-Mohammed and Lashkar-e-Taiba.** An attack linked to one of these groups that is traced back to Pakistan and facilitated from Afghanistan could badly damage prospects for improved bilateral ties and jeopardize regional stability. India, as the likely target, can be expected to retaliate against any such attack, risking escalation and intensifying threat perceptions. The United States should be mindful of these Indian concerns and ensure that both groups receive attention in the counterterrorism provisions of any Afghanistan settlement and future counterterrorism efforts. It should also maintain pressure on Pakistan to rein in these groups and make clear the serious consequences that would follow an attack, meanwhile coordinating with India to provide reassurance.

- **Alleged Indian proxy support.** Given the resurgence of the TTP and increase in attacks in former FATA and Balochistan, Pakistani claims of Indian backing for the group are likely to also intensify.[97] These allegations may be in part an effort to deflect blame for Pakistan's security challenges, but the United States and other third parties should investigate and determine whether any of the claims are substantiated. If so, Washington should raise the issue privately with New Delhi and press for an end

Following on the recent joint statement issued by China, Pakistan, Russia, and the United States denying support to "any government imposed by force," Washington should emphasize to Pakistan the consequences that would result were Islamabad to recognize such a Taliban battlefield victory.

to such destabilizing activities, which risk fueling regional conflict. Finally, the United States should encourage Afghan and Indian leaders to engage in a private dialogue to limit such activities being undertaken via Afghanistan.

- **Irredentist claims.** If and when talks over border management or Durand Line recognition are under way, public statements from Afghan political leaders laying claim to Pakistani territory will increase. Such statements, popular among some domestic constituencies in Afghanistan, inflame Pakistan's threat perceptions and could create challenges in the ongoing talks. The United States and other third parties should make it clear to Afghanistan's leaders that they recognize the Durand Line and that statements to the contrary will not be viewed favorably. In the event that such claims are made, the third parties should publicly reiterate their recognition of the border.[98]

- **Recognition of Taliban military victory.** Given the damaging instability likely to result from a civil war or Taliban military takeover, third parties should create incentives to resolve the conflict at the negotiating table. Following on the recent joint statement issued by China, Pakistan, Russia, and the United States denying support to "any government imposed by force," Washington should emphasize to Pakistan the consequences that would result were Islamabad to recognize such a Taliban battlefield victory.[99] Pakistan could continue to privately agree not to do so as a show of good faith and commitment to the political settlement process and could communicate this intent to the Taliban as a warning against destabilizing military action.

Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan, left, and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani attend a joint news conference at the Presidential Palace in Kabul on November 19, 2020. (Photo by Rahmat Gul/AP)

Conclusion

In a recent conference intended to promote regional connectivity, Afghanistan's and Pakistan's leaders revealed instead the deep divisions that separate the two countries. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani claimed that Pakistan-based "networks and organizations supporting the Taliban are openly celebrating the destruction of the assets and capabilities of the Afghan people and State." In response, Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan pointed to Pakistan's war casualties and the instability it could expect from conflict in Afghanistan, arguing that an ascendent Taliban could not be swayed despite Pakistan's best efforts.[100] These claims echo the disputes that have dogged bilateral relations over the past seven decades and persist despite repeated attempts at engagement. Given the history of their conflicting security, sovereignty, and geopolitical interests, the two states have a difficult task ahead if they are to foster improved ties.

Heading into a likely increase in instability following the withdrawal of international forces, prospects for improved bilateral relations appear dim. Tensions between the two sides risk foreclosing on the few remaining avenues to reach a negotiated settlement and stave off further conflict, to the detriment of both. Despite these long odds, this moment of crisis could also lay the groundwork for a potential thaw. Lessons learned on both sides after forty years of conflict, combined with broader regional shifts and geopolitical dynamics, could create space to contain and manage the sovereignty- and security-related concerns that have to date interfered with bilateral ties.

If Afghanistan and Pakistan can harness the productive potential of their shared cross-border ties while building on trade and connectivity linkages, the advantages

of a more positive relationship could come to outweigh the risks such engagement has previously held. By engaging in bilateral dialogue, leveraging cross-border Pashtun ties, acknowledging core issues, and generating momentum through CBMs, the two states can build the scaffolding for improved regional connectivity, economic development, and governance.

The United States and other third parties can support this process, but external involvement is necessarily limited in impact and could ultimately prove counterproductive if not well calibrated. Helpful steps Washington could take include encouraging bilateral contacts without interfering, pressing for dialogue between India and Pakistan on Afghanistan, taking on a limited verification role for bilateral commitments, and addressing potential spoilers in the process.

In the end, bilateral relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan are just one piece of a larger web of interrelated regional security and political dynamics. Stronger Afghanistan-Pakistan ties alone can only go so far in building stability across the region and improving the lives of those whose ties span the shared border. External challenges could again scuttle hopes for a strengthened bilateral relationship and instead give way to continued, destabilizing acrimony. Such an outcome is, unfortunately, more likely than not given the immense challenges of attaining peace in Afghanistan and overcoming decades of bilateral tensions.

In the event that conflict abates in Afghanistan, however, the Afghanistan-Pakistan bilateral relationship will play a key role in either building on the new stability or threatening to compromise it. As many interviewees agreed, this relationship is crucial to ensuring long-term peace and prosperity in both states and in the wider region. By acknowledging and working to address one another's security and sovereignty concerns through a process of patient dialogue, Afghanistan and Pakistan stand the best chance of strengthening ties for the benefit of regional stability and the well-being of their citizens.

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