



## A See-Saw Relationship: Afghanistan's Ties with Pakistan

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### ABSTRACT

*Afghanistan has a unique geopolitical situation, which makes it important not only for Pakistan but also for many global and regional powers. Though both neighboring countries have many common interests yet their Foreign Policy relations have been dwindling over time due to historically ingrained contemporary issues. It has a profound impact on Pakistan's security and economic interests, such as the issue of smuggling and bilateral trade, as well as strategic issues, such as the Durand Line issue and elusive "strategic depth." The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 was a major cause of global concern and a turning point in international politics. Soviet expansionism and the subsequent war on terror after 9/11 posed a challenge to Pakistan's security, and the country emerged as a "frontline state." The paper highlights what possible benefits Pakistan can accrue through viable Foreign Policy. The situation in Afghanistan has serious consequences for Pakistan's internal and external security due to the involvement of many external actors, especially India.*

**Keywords:** Afghanistan, Pakistan, War on Terror, Foreign Policy, Security.

## Introduction

Located at the crossroads of Central, South, and West Asia, Afghanistan enjoys a unique geo-strategic significance. During the last Great Game, Afghanistan remained pivotal to the power struggle between British Empire and Russian Czars. More recently, with the breakup of Soviet Union and emergence of newly independent Central Asian Republics, Afghanistan's status as a gateway to the vast natural resources of these landlocked states has put the spotlight firmly back on Afghanistan. Similarly, in the post 9/11 scenario with Afghanistan's pivotal role in the global war against terror, it has also come to occupy a central position in the security calculus both at the regional as well as global level.

Due to its strong historical, religious and cultural linkages with Afghanistan and vital strategic interests, a stable and friendly Afghanistan is a strategic compulsion for Pakistan. With the exit of Taliban from the Afghan government and emergence of NATO- dominated Interim government, Afghanistan has been in a state of flux and the ensuing developments are likely to have far-reaching implications for Afghanistan as well as the region as a whole. Moreover, the recent developments in Afghanistan have presented India with a unique window of opportunity to position it favorably and shape the future course of events to its strategic advantage

Vast expanses of deserted wilderness, inaccessible mountain terrain, weak writ of the government resulting in lawlessness, geo-strategic proximity to Central Asian Republics, and ethnic lineage with neighboring Pakistan and Iran are a few factors determining the implications of peace in Afghanistan. The fact that the great powers of the day have remained interested in Afghanistan substantiates the assertion that the Afghan security situation has the potential to generate effects far beyond its immediate neighborhood. Pakistan, more than any other neighbor, has been directly affected by any deterioration in the Afghan security situation.

## Geographic and Demographic Importance

Afghanistan is a landlocked country strategically located between the Gulf, South Asia, and Central Asia. It borders to the South and West with Iran, to the North with the republics of Central Asia (Uzbekistan and Tajikistan) and to the East with Pakistan. The definition of these borders is quite political, which results in the division of ethnic groups.

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Therefore, today we find that the tribes living in Afghanistan have strong ties with their relatives who have settled across the border. This also explains the cause of external interests and distortions in Afghan affairs.

## Political History

The strategic position of Afghanistan has a huge impact on the country's political history. All invasions from West to South Asia, including the Silk Road, passed through presently called Afghanistan. A keen review of the country's history manifests that it was primarily ruled by the Pashtuns in the form of a tribal confederation until the Saur Revolution in 1978.<sup>1</sup> In 1979 the Soviet invaded and ruled Afghanistan politically until its evacuation in 1989. No government has been able to establish itself in Afghanistan since the evacuation of Soviet troops. Two things are obvious from the history of Afghanistan: the Pashtun have traditionally ruled the region, and it has always been a tribe of autonomy or freedom.

## Ethnicity

Afghanistan has many ethnic groups, besides the Pashtun; the Tajiks, the Uzbeks and the Hazaras. These groups have great political influence in the country and maintain significant links with outside forces. Therefore, a powerful relationship exists between the ethnic groups and the external forces they attract.

## Religion.

Islam is the most dominant religion, however, the existence of various sects and ethnicities leads to a large variety of religious practices. The official religion of the country is Islam. But tensions remain high among the different groups due to various ethnic and sectarian divides.

## Extent of Influence of External Powers

Historical ties of various ethnic and sectarian groups with various neighboring countries have led to various divisions within Afghanistan. Today the ethnic and religious boundaries within Afghanistan are the manifestation of the open support from its regional neighbors. Due to conflicting interests of various regional powers, Afghanistan has become the silent battleground for numerous regional and non-regional countries. Interestingly,

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<sup>1</sup> "The Saur Revolution: Prelude to the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan," Association for Diplomatic Studies & Training, April 22, 2016, <https://adst.org/2016/04/the-saur-revolution-prelude-to-the-soviet-invasion-of-afghanistan/>.

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exploitation of this economic potential by the external forces is dependent on the internal stability, i.e., how well the external powers can help or assist in creating a peaceful resolution to internal problems. It, therefore, becomes critical to understand the interests and extent of influence of following external powers towards the resolution of Afghan issue:

## **Pakistan**

Pakistan has the most extensive and strongest ties with Afghanistan. During the Afghan War, Pakistan extended decisive support to Afghans, which ultimately led to the Soviet withdrawal. Despite its meager resources, Pakistan holds the largest Afghan refugee population. Therefore, it would be correct to say that Pakistan has the highest stakes in the peaceful resolution of the situation. Politically, Pakistan is supporting a political settlement between the Taliban and present government as it ensures the security of its western borders. However, it is in the economic sphere that Pakistan is looking to gain influence. Opening the CPEC route with the Central Asian Republics and China for international trade with the West requires a port and overland access to it. The logical choice for a port is Karachi and Gwadar. If this were to materialize, the economic opportunities for Pakistan would be enormous. Economically, it also directly impacts relations with India, because this would give Pakistan a much stronger position to bargain during future trade talks with India.

## **Iran**

Iran has limited relations with Afghanistan as a whole. From an ethnic point of view, Iran has no other ties than the Hazaras, who are religiously at odds with the overwhelming Sunni majority and the current Islamic government. Iran's main interest is to protect the rights and sovereignty of Shia Muslims living in Afghanistan and to use the economic potential of the Central Asian republics. Iran is expected to do all it can to protect these interests. The major objectives of Iran are to

- provide maximal help to Shia parties and groups.
- make sure that Taliban influence is removed so that they cannot influence Iranian territory
- provide roads to the Central Asian republics via Iran.
- counter the policies of Saudi Arabia and the United States.
- get maximum trade from the Central Asian republics by refusing Pakistan a land route through Afghanistan.

## Central Asian Republics

Rectification of the Afghan catastrophe is crucial to the Central Asian Republics. They have powerful ethnic connections with Afghanistan and if the region becomes stable, the economic opportunities for both sides would be enormous. From an ethnic point of view, the Tajiks and Uzbeks are important minority groups and have maintained independent autonomy throughout the region's history. New developments suggest that this is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future, nor does it seem likely that their supporters will join these areas.

## Russia

Russia has many economic and political fascinations in Afghanistan. An orthodox and unstable Islamic government in Afghanistan is seen as a menace by the Russians, as they fear that such progress will outstretch the Central Asian republics, which they still consider as their satellite realm. In this factor, the Russians are likely to retain their benefits at the fore and not miss out on the economic interests that Afghanistan could grow by giving access to a hot water port. It also appreciates the prosperity that could result in the region through political stability. The major interests of Russia in Afghanistan are

- denying the emergence of a fundamentalist bloc in the region.
- countering the strategy of the USA in Afghanistan.
- establishing a pro-Russian government.
- securing an overland route to the Central Asian republics via Afghanistan to gain access to hot water ports.

## India

India is committed to continuing the civil war, or at least that Afghan government endures enmity toward Pakistan for the reasons that

- it must not receive the support of the Afghan tribe for the fight for Kashmir.
- make sure Pakistan loses its strategic depth.
- depict Pakistan as a destabilizer in Afghanistan.
- Pakistan denied access to an overland route to the Central Asian republics.
- generate antagonism between Iran and Pakistan.
- send large Pakistani forces to the Afghan border.

## China

Although the Chinese will keep their interest in the economic sphere, they will try at the same time to

- stop the spread of Islamic fundamentalism in Singkiang, China.
- allow limited trade across the Karakoram Highway to ensure its usefulness with a long-term vision of maintaining Pakistan's strategic coastal openness and trade management.

## Genesis of Pak-Afghan relations

### Contemporary Issues between Pakistan and Afghanistan

Pakistan shares a 2240 Km long border with Afghanistan. Although Pakistan and Afghanistan share similar ethnicity, culture, religion and common interest, the relations between the two countries have always remained strained due to one reason or another. Despite best efforts, Pakistan has failed to alleviate the mistrust of the Afghan government and its minority population. The root cause lies in the contemporary issues which over the time have become hard to address. The most important of these are:

### Durand line

The settled border between Afghanistan and Pakistan was brought into question by President Hamid Karzai, declaring it an unresolved dispute between the two countries. It was because of this claim that Afghanistan, the only Muslim country, vehemently opposed the acceptance of Pakistan in the UN.<sup>2</sup> According to the revisionist stance, Afghanistan claimed that the dispute which concluded in 1894 between the King of Afghanistan, Abdul Rehman and Mortimer Durand, representative of the British empire, was a temporary arrangement and was valid for only 100 yrs. It became invalid after the withdrawal of the British from the sub-continent. On the other hand, Pakistan considers it a settled issue as per international law. The issue of the Durand line has become a continuing irritant between the two neighbors.

### Issue of Pashtunistan

Based on the historical invasions of Ahmad Shah Abdali from 1747 to 1773, Afghanistan laid its claim on certain areas of northern parts of Pakistan and flamed the issue

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<sup>2</sup> Barnett Rubin and Abubakar Siddique, "Resolving the Pakistan Afghanistan Stalemate - USIP Special Report," usip.org, 2006, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/resources/SRoct06.pdf>.

of Pashtunistan, thus exploiting the ethnic and nationalistic fault lines of its neighbor. Consequently, Afghanistan has always supported the Baloch and Pashtun nationalist movements since the emergence of Pakistan.<sup>3</sup> Afghanistan's continued support and the irrational claim is considered to be influenced by Pakistan arch-rival India.

### **Blame Game and supporting cross-border Terrorism**

Both neighbors blame each other for cross-border infiltration. Increased influence of regional power, especially India, has led to the increased use of proxies to destabilize Pakistan by exploiting its ethnic and sectarian fault lines. The establishment of Indian consulate along the Pak-Afghan border and their connections with terror outfits is no hidden secret. Afghanistan's government's hostile attitude and Indian influence has led to a complex security situation in border regions of Pakistan. Pakistan has raised its concern over establishing terrorist training camps located in various cities of Afghanistan, along the border. Pakistan believes that these Indian consulate offices in Afghanistan are involved in fanning unrest in Pakistan's western provinces of Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, including tribal areas to sabotage the peace and process of development in these regions. Whereas Afghanistan blames Pakistan for its influence and support to Afghan Taliban, notwithstanding that it was only during the 4 years rule of Taliban when there were no hostilities among the neighboring states. Prominent Afghan Officials including their National Security Advisor, have accused Pakistan of cross-border attacks on International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) forces and the Afghan central government. They have also been blaming Pakistan's intelligence agency ISI in supporting the Anti-government forces of Afghanistan. Pakistan endorses that the problems faced by Afghanistan and international forces present in Afghanistan are themselves responsible for this security and political dilemma due to their incompetence and biased policies.

### **Mistrust of Afghan Government**

Continuous strained relations between the two neighbors have led to deep mistrust toward Pakistan among Afghan officials, which has been compounded by the exploitation of India. Despite the assurance of the Pakistan government, Afghanistan continues its blame game against Pakistan, thus creating a negative perception among its population. Despite its

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<sup>3</sup> Kriti Shah, "The Baloch and Pashtun Nationalist Movements in Pakistan: Colonial Legacy and the Failure of State Policy," ORF, July 2019, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-baloch-and-pashtun-nationalist-movements-in-pakistan-colonial-legacy-and-the-failure-of-state-policy-53691/>.

positive role in peace-building, Pakistan is being blamed for every ill and failure of the Afghan government.

### **Pakistan's support to US-led coalition in War on Terror**

Terrorist attacks on 9/11 forced Pakistan to join US-led War on Terror (WoT). Pakistan had been extending its political, financial and diplomatic support to Taliban government since the soviet withdrawal. Pakistan had to reverse its long-pursued policy of supporting Taliban government. Pakistan fully extended its support to coalition forces, which led to severe grievances among the Taliban sympathizer. The situation was exploited by the hostile forces in Afghanistan and several splinter groups of Taliban sympathizers announced their war against Pakistan. Pakistan bore thousands of terrorist attacks and lost 80,000 lives in this WOT. These splinter groups, being operated by hostile forces in Afghanistan still remain the major cause of security concern in Pakistan.

### **Indian Factor**

India has fully exploited the post-9/11 situation to sever Pakistan's interest in Afghanistan. Although India doesn't share any border with Afghanistan, it has gained a strong influence over the Afghan administration. The pattern of Indian and Pakistan's relations with Afghanistan is considered as inversely proportional to each other's gains. In the aftermath of 9/11, India became adamant to establish and develop relations with Afghanistan at the expense of Pak-Afghan relations.

### **Afghan Refugees**

Pakistan hosts the largest population of Afghan refugees. After soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Pakistan faced a large influx of displaced Afghan nationals<sup>4</sup> who were seeking shelter against the Soviet war. Pakistan not only welcomed refugees with open hands but also provided shelter to the 3million refugees, despite the fact that during Khilafat movement crisis, Afghanistan denied entry to the Muslims of sub-continent. Due to unstable security situation in Afghanistan and non-cooperation of international community, the return of Afghan refugees still remains pended. In addition to economic strain, the large influx of Afghan refugees has led to deteriorating social, political and security environment in the country. Afghan refugees are being used by different regional powers to serve their own interest.

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<sup>4</sup> IPS, "Afghan Refugees in Pakistan Current Situation and Future Scenario," Institute of Policy Studies, July 6, 2006, <https://www.ips.org.pk/afghan-refugees-in-pakistan-current-situation-and-future-scenario/>.



## **Drug Trafficking**

Drug trafficking along the Pak-Afghan border is the major cause of concern in Pakistan. Drug traffickers exploit the lawlessness in Afghanistan and use it as their staging base for drug trafficking operations. Pakistan have raised its concern for Afghanistan's failure to devise a joint mechanism to stop drug smuggling as drug money is eventually used to support terrorism in Pakistan. Pakistan blames Afghan war lords present in the government setup for supporting these narcotics smuggling.

Historical perspective of Pak-Afghan relations

## **Emergence of Pakistan**

The formal relationship between the two nations after 1947 began coldly, as Afghanistan initially opposed the uprising in Pakistan and did not recognize its territorial integrity. The main reasons were the revision of the Durand Line and the postulate to create an independent state called Pashtunistan.

In the 1960s, Pakistan and Afghanistan were on the brink of war due to the issue. In 1979, the President of Afghanistan contacted Pakistani president Zia-ul-Haq and proposed Afghanistan's acceptance of the Durand Line as an international border. However, he was executed by the invasion of Soviet troops in 1979, after which relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan declined.

## **Soviet Occupation Era**

In 1979, Soviet troops attacked Afghanistan, but anti-government guerilla forces intercepted the preceding Soviet Union from taking full control of Afghanistan. The main goal of Pakistani decision-makers in supporting the Afghan war was to block the emergence of Afghan nationalism and convince a friendly government in Kabul.

## **Post-Soviet Era**

In 1989 the Soviet Union withdrew, and in 1992 Burhanuddin Rabbani became provisional President. The Rabbani government believed that Pakistan had betrayed a longstanding friendship based on military, economic and logistical support during the civil war in Afghanistan. These sentiments were expressed by the representative of the Rabbani government to the United Nations; hence Pakistan was left to the Northern Alliance with no credibility in negotiating peace for Afghanistan.

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## Taliban Era

In 1996, the Taliban established their government in Kabul. Pakistan recognized the Taliban as part of its foreign policy to protect its western borders. This recognition has had many serious consequences for Pakistan.

## Post-Taliban Era

The terrorist attacks of 9 September in the United States posed a dilemma for Pakistan following which President General Pervez Musharraf announced that Pakistan would grant “unlimited cooperation” to the international alliance against terrorism. This decision manifested an important change in Islamabad’s thinking concerning the Taliban.<sup>5</sup>

Due to strong Indian influence on the present Afghan political setup, there has been a lot of mistrust between the two neighbors. Despite sincere efforts, Pakistan is seen with a suspicious eye. To divert attention from its own incompetence and political infighting, the Afghan government blames Pakistan for every wrong.

## US Withdrawal from Afghanistan and analysis of the current situation

On 29 Feb 2020, an agreement was signed between US and Taliban representatives to ensure safe withdrawal of US troops by May 2021. However, on April 14, 2021, President Joe Biden announced that the United States would start withdrawing its troops on 1<sup>st</sup> May 2021 to complete it by 11 September 2021. US-led WOT in Afghanistan has been the longest war America has fought. The US has lost 2300 soldiers at the cost of around \$1 trillion. Although the American and its allies were able to topple the Taliban government by Dec 2001, the situation remains turbulent.

While announcing the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, US administration declared that US had achieved its strategic objectives and would not involve itself in East Asia’s war and would not risk its troops anymore. While addressing the concerns of Afghanistan government, US assured that diplomatic and counter-insurgency mechanisms will remain in place to face any security threats from Taliban and its sympathizers. US will continue its support to Afghan regime and its security apparatus.

Afghan security situation remained far from stable and it could be easily postulated that once the United States and its allies withdrew, it would be difficult to stop the Taliban. It

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<sup>5</sup> “USATODAY.com - Musharraf’s Book Says Pakistan Faced U.S. ‘Onslaught’ If It Didn’t Back Terror War,” [usatoday30.usatoday.com, https://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2006-09-25-pakistan-memoir\\_x.htm](https://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2006-09-25-pakistan-memoir_x.htm).

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is quite evident as more and more regular troops refuse to fight the Taliban and are handing over military bases to the Taliban without any resistance due to a sense of insecurity.

Moreover, political infighting between Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani has resulted in weak Afghan government marred by incompetence. The government forces could only control Kabul and other large cities, whereas the Taliban influence is present in most of the country's territory and rural areas.

Considering the present situation, it can safely predict two possibilities after the withdrawal of US troops. Firstly, Taliban being the biggest stakeholder in the future, set up moves to a political solution and mediates with other ethnic and political groups to form a national government. Whereas Afghan government accommodates Taliban's proper representation in the future political setup. This would mean long-term peace after forty-two years of war.

In the second situation, instead of reconciliation both parties, i.e., Taliban and Afghan government indulge themselves in military takeovers and intend to continue the war alone against their traditional opponents, at which point peace negotiations between the two sides would break down. This would lead to an ending and prolonged civil war.

This is not the first time that US is leaving without ensuring a stable and secure Afghanistan. After soviet withdrawal US left the region leaving behind issues of militancy, political instability, refugee influx and economic collapse. This time, US administration has failed to create a secure and stable Afghanistan before packing up its military presence.

Just after the announcement of US withdrawal, various militant groups have started a new wave of militancy attacks to increase their influence and subsequently improve their bargaining position for a future political setup. Since US withdrawal occurred as a result of US-Taliban agreement, the Taliban hold political legitimacy as they have been accepted as a largest stake holder in future political setup.

The power vacuum if not filled earlier may lead to other militant groups gaining their influence. This would lead to more civil war, more insecure population and more civil casualties, thus leading to more devastation for Afghanistan.

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Increased instability in Afghanistan would have spillover effects on its neighbors especially Pakistan. It would increase the refugee influx, aggravate the security situation in border region, flame the extremism and would encourage the cross-border terrorism.

In case of civil war, Pakistan would have no option but to support Taliban in their power struggle as Pakistan's main objective would be to reduce Indian influence in the region.

### **Implication on Pakistan and its Political objectives**

After a prolonged war, US has started winding up its military bases in line with US-Taliban peace accord signed in Feb 2020 without agreed power sharing formula between Afghan government and Taliban. As the US military bases are being handed over to Afghan National Army (ANA), the insecurity among the local population is increasing. More and more people have started joining the ranks of Taliban in order to guarantee their own safety after Taliban comes to power. Despite being in possession of modern equipment ANA is not putting any kind of resistance to Taliban advance.

Seemingly, US would not again involve itself in physical military operations and would adhere to its policy of non-interference, as they did after Soviet withdrawal, only to leave behind refugee, economic and security crisis for Afghanistan and its neighbors. Now it has been left to the neighboring countries with Pakistan at its core to help Afghanistan reach a power-sharing arrangement. With so much influence of other regional stake holders especially keeping in view India's negative role it seems to be beyond the capacity of the Pakistan singly to secure future of peace in Afghanistan. The United Nations, international community, neighboring countries and Afghan government would have to learn from their mistakes and understand that once foreign troops leave and there is an internal military power struggle, it would not be of benefit to anyone, not the Afghans, not Pakistan rather everyone would lose.

Conversely, regional cooperation with Pakistan at its core can turn the region into a zone of opportunity, trade, commerce and transit. Consequently, everyone would be beneficiary to this peace.

Pakistan is the biggest stake holder in the future of Afghanistan due to its ethnic, religious and geographic compulsions. However still Pakistan would safeguard its own political objectives before supporting any power sharing agreement between various stake holders

## **Stopping Terrorism**

Peace and stability in Pakistan are profoundly connected to peaceful Afghanistan. Pakistan shares a 2640km border with Afghanistan. Due to geographic compulsions, this lengthy border has been used for infiltration and cross-border raids. A stable broad-based government restrain the growth of terrorism not only within Afghanistan but will also restricts its spill over to Pakistan.

## **Mitigating the Indian influence**

An unstable Afghanistan threatens Pakistan's security, economy and its internal militancy. But due to increased Indian influence on present Afghan setup, Pakistan would like a neutral government which would not allow its soil to be used by any hostile country. It is imperative for Pakistan to counter Indian influence in Afghanistan. Its influence on Afghan setup has grown over the years in the garb of providing economic and developmental aid with an ultimate aim of increasing its military influence. India was using its consulate to exploit ethnic and sectarian fault lines of Pakistan and causing unrest. A broad-based friendly Afghan set up would be key to reducing Indian influence and regaining trust of the Afghan government. It would also secure Pakistan's western border from Indian proxies and would serve the dual purpose of giving sanctity to Pak-Afghan border something which present Afghan government have refused to do.

## **Repatriation of Refugees**

A safe, secure and prospering Afghanistan will pave a way for safe repatriation of over 4 million refugees from Pakistan. Pakistan has been a host to these Afghan refugees for nearly 40 years. Their presence has impacted our society negatively and has affected Pakistan socially, politically and economically.

## **Trade and Commerce**

A stable and prosperous Afghanistan would allow Pakistan to increase its trade which today stands at about 2.5 billion US dollars. It will allow other regional countries to use CPEC to link up China, India, South Asian region, Central Asia, Iran and the Middle-East. This, alone would generate tremendous economic growth for the whole region. It will also

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expedite completion of power projects like CASA–1000 and the TAPI project,<sup>6</sup> thus propelling industrial growth and bringing prosperity to the whole region.

### Conclusion

To a greater extent, Afghanistan's peaceful future depends on regional support to power-sharing agreement between various Afghan stakeholders. An unstable Afghanistan would not only promote terrorism and extremism within its own borders but would spill over to its neighbor, subsequently to the region and ultimately to the world. Pakistan is the biggest stakeholder in the future of Afghanistan due to its ethnic, religious and geographic compulsions. Pakistan and Afghanistan have become economically interlinked after the Afghan war. Even after the repatriation of Afghan regime, Pakistan's KPK and Afghanistan's eastern provinces are bound to remain interlinked, economically and culturally. A share in Afghanistan reconstruction coupled with commercial relations are likely to have positive influence on Pakistan's economic sector.

Pakistan has always played an effective role in resolution of Afghan crises and her contribution and the spirited response has been accorded due recognition. Aware of the prevailing cross currents, regional moods and own situation, Pakistan must keep on making concrete efforts to resolve the Afghan problem, as it would be in its own larger interest.

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<sup>6</sup> Bruce Pannier, "The Prospects of TAPI and CASA 1000," RFE/RL, May 8, 2016, <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/afghanista-entral-asia-tapi-casa-1000/27722356.html>.