

## **Afghanistan's Regime Change: Implications for the Power Dynamics of India and Pakistan**

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### **Introduction**

Afghanistan has had a turbulent history, especially over the last four decades. The rapid and hasty withdrawal of US forces paved the way for the Taliban to take control of Afghanistan in mid-August. Although the Taliban have come to power, their ascent beyond the capture of Kabul has been a complicated one. They are currently facing immense challenges—a lack of formal recognition on the international stage and economic challenges due to the frozen foreign reserves are a few examples—which are compounded by the shortage of food and resources amidst a harsh winter. This paper aims to dissect the impacts of the developments in Afghanistan over the last three decades in relation to the geo-politics of the region, primarily focusing on the changing power dynamics between India and Pakistan.

First, it is essential to contextualise the topic by taking a look at the historical background of Afghanistan's tumultuous past and foreign occupations. This is followed by an exploration of Pakistan's and India's relations with Afghanistan through the last Taliban regime of the 1990s (Phase 1) and then by the US-backed government (Phase 2). Lastly, this paper considers the current situation regarding the power dynamics at play between Pakistan and India (Phase 3).

### **Three Superpowers, Three Failures**

The United States' humiliating exit from Afghanistan was a surprising development to most. It was not, however, the first foreign power to fail in its mission to subjugate the Afghan people. The country is often referred to as the 'graveyard of empires', as many have theorised that Afghanistan has in its recent history ousted three superpowers:

the British Empire; the Soviet Union; and most recently the United States.<sup>1</sup> The British invaded Afghanistan in 1839 out of a fear of the Russians gaining a foothold in the country and then using it to attack South Asia. They were forced to withdraw in 1842. Nevertheless, they made two more attempts in 1878 and 1919 before giving up their efforts to conquer Afghanistan.<sup>2</sup> The Soviet occupation followed from 1979 to 1989 and led to the creation of the Mujahedeen in a combined effort by the US, Pakistan, and other likeminded allies. The Mujahedeen, an Afghan insurgent group, were armed and trained in an attempt to expel the Soviet forces from the Afghan soil, and eventually led to the formation of the Taliban.<sup>3</sup>

### **Enter the US**

The United States entered Afghanistan in an attempt to thwart the rising threat of terrorism following the 9/11 attacks. The *Financial Times* reported that the US spent an approximated \$1 trillion dollars and two decades in an attempt to fight the war on terror and stabilise Afghan society.<sup>4</sup> Yet they were unsuccessful on almost all fronts and many argue that Afghanistan was destabilised further by the intervention at the hands of the US. All of these failures highlight the resilience of the Afghan people, their resolve to govern their homeland themselves, and their ability to overthrow foreign invaders.

### **Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India: A Deadly Triangle**

India and Pakistan, the two major countries of South Asia, have a turbulent relationship with little chance for improvement in the near future. India and Afghanistan have a longstanding

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relationship due to the interlinked historical and political ties. Pakistan and Afghanistan are neighbouring states that share a complicated history. Similar to Afghanistan and India, there are social, cultural, and historical links between both countries and many would argue that Pakistan and Afghanistan hold more in common, ranging from similar cultural traditions, to shared languages, ethnic groups, and majority Muslim populations. However, one major issue that has caused complications between the two states is that of the Durand line, the 1,500 miles long border dividing Afghanistan and Pakistan, has never been recognised by Afghanistan as an international border. Rather, Kabul has claimed ownership of various Pashtun territories in Pakistan comprising the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.<sup>5</sup> Afghanistan's relations with both India and Pakistan have been unstable, ever-changing, and highly dependent on the policies of the government in power at the time. Both countries have a vested interest in Afghanistan and have been engaging in a proverbial tug of war over the region through the years.

## Phase 1

To understand the dynamics of the geopolitics of the region during the first Taliban regime, it is important to look at the national interests of Pakistan and India during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Pakistan was a key geostrategic ally of the US in stemming the tide of communism and together the partnership supported a coalition of insurgent groups referred to as the Mujahedeen, within Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup> Conversely, India was against growing Pakistani influence in Afghanistan and did not perceive the Soviet presence as a threat to Indian national security. Thus, as the Taliban government took control of Kabul in 1996, relations between India and Afghanistan deteriorated and Pakistan moved into a more favourable position with its western neighbour.

India's relationship with Afghanistan was strained due to the raging civil conflict, Islamic extremism, and rise in terrorism. India had hoped for Afghanistan to experience stability through the introduction of a democratic system. However, the

Taliban government stood in opposition to the ideals of a democracy, denying basic human rights and infringing on the freedom of the Afghan people. India viewed the Taliban as an extremist group that was backed by Pakistan causing suspicion and mistrust in their government. Due to their misgivings over the Taliban acting as a proxy for Pakistan, along with the former's extremist views, India refused to recognise their government.<sup>7</sup> Whereas Pakistan was one of the three countries to formally recognise the Taliban's government.<sup>8</sup> India's continued support to the Northern Alliance, who were actively opposing the Taliban, also caused increased hostility towards India and put a stop to cordial relations.<sup>9</sup>

## Phase 2

The attacks on September 11th once again upset the regional power dynamics as a new era dawned with the US War on Terror and physical intervention in Afghanistan. Following the 9/11 attacks and the consequent US involvement in Afghanistan, the regional power balance shifted in favour of India. With the advent of the Karzai government, installed by the United States, Afghanistan's foreign policy became favourable towards India. This period brought about a more amicable relationship between the two governments through the re-establishment of bilateral links.

In 2009, Karzai's government reached an impasse with the US and sought to improve regional relations. Subsequently, Afghanistan signed a strategic agreement with India, which included training of Afghan security forces to be undertaken by India.<sup>10</sup> Post-9/11, Pakistan was left with two options: either to continue to support the Taliban or to ally with the American-led international coalition against terrorism.<sup>11</sup> The following twenty years of US-Pakistan relations were defined by the needs of the US war in Afghanistan. Upon the US invasion and the shift in the Afghan government, Pakistan was not only isolated but also incurred the distrust of the US. This caused further strain on its relationship with Afghanistan, thereby, allowing India to gain a stronger foothold in Afghanistan. During former Afghan president Ashraf Ghani's term, India invested



heavily in Afghanistan, spending approximately \$3 billion on over 400 development and infrastructure related projects.<sup>12</sup> Bilateral trade also flourished between the countries, peaking at \$1.5 billion in 2019-20.<sup>13</sup> This was made possible due to the air freight corridor launched between India and Afghanistan in 2017 and an alternate trade route through Iran's Chabahar Port to Kabul.<sup>14</sup> These routes allowed India to bypass Pakistan completely and establish mutually beneficial trade links with Afghanistan. Although Pak-Afghan relations became strained due to the insurgencies, it is important to note that bilateral trade between the two saw an increase after 2000, reaching \$540 million in 2003-04. Moreover a further \$1.2 billion in 2004-05.<sup>15</sup> This was followed by the signing of the Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade agreement in 2010 which was committed to increasing that figure to \$5 billion by 2015.<sup>16</sup> Pakistan also committed to funding various assistance programmes and humanitarian efforts in Afghanistan, such as building the Torkham-Jalalabad Highway in Nangarhar.<sup>17</sup> However, the US was seen increasingly favouring India which was reflected within Afghanistan. This aggravated Indo-Pak relations, due to which Pakistan sought to strengthen its alliance with China.

### Phase 3

Many analysts have predicted that the regime change in Afghanistan is likely to cause a rift in the close-knit relationship that was curated between India and Afghanistan during the US occupation. Upon the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan, India's presence in the country was essentially expunged through the closure of its embassy and consulates and evacuation of its personnel.<sup>18</sup> Pakistan, on the other hand, did not close its embassy or consulates or carry out any evacuations but was instead committed to facilitating the transition between governments and acting as a mediator between the Taliban and the international community. Additionally, Pakistan has been trying to stave off Afghanistan's economic collapse by reducing barriers to trade like the removal of tariffs for certain goods and the use of local currency and currency swap agreements.<sup>19</sup>

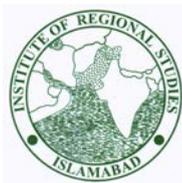
Pakistan has to engage with the Taliban government to protect its own national interests. Should Afghanistan descend into chaos, Pakistan will face the effects of the fall-out with threats to national security and an exodus of refugees, straining Pakistan's already stressed resources.

India's position has become a lot more uncertain during this phase. A multitude of reasons can be given for the changing relationship, one being the difference in ideology. India is a secular country which is in stark contrast to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. India also views the Taliban as a 'proxy' of its arch-rival Pakistan and has openly supported the Northern Alliance against the Taliban since their first regime.<sup>20</sup> This trust deficit renders cooperation between the two nations a very challenging task. India remains wary of their longstanding alleged association with Pakistan's intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).<sup>21</sup> Despite this, India has reached out to Afghanistan with humanitarian relief efforts, offering 50,000 metric tonnes of wheat through the World Food Programme and medicine through the World Health Organisation.<sup>22</sup> Although they have yet to fulfil the promise made regarding the shipment of wheat through Pakistan, these are positive steps in Indo-Afghan relations. Nonetheless, it should be recognised that these attempts to send aid through international agencies are to help the Afghan people rather than an effort to establish a relationship with the current government.

The shift in favour of Pakistan is thus apparent, which will likely be augmented by the strategic interests of another power in the region: China. Given China's interest in Afghanistan, Pakistan will be able to leverage its ties with the country to further cement its influence and counter Indian efforts to do the same. This could result in the emergence of two regional blocs, China, Pakistan, Afghanistan versus the US and India. The China-US rivalry plays into this whole scenario and could lead to a new era of proxy wars, wherein Afghanistan is once again the battleground.

### Conclusion

Looking at the relationship between the three countries through a historical lens it can be



argued that Afghanistan's relationship with either state comes at the cost of its relationship with the other. Phase one saw Pakistan at a strategic advantage, Phase two allowed India to overtake Pakistan's influence within Afghanistan, and Phase 3 which is still in its early stages is set to see the tide turn in favour of Pakistan. History demonstrates that Afghanistan cannot have mutually beneficial relations with both India and Pakistan simultaneously. As the dominant powers in South Asia, the rivalry between India and Pakistan cannot take a backseat, overshadowing Afghanistan's own

interests. The future of Afghanistan is uncertain and the alliance that is forming could be beneficial to Pakistan if handled correctly. If not, it could prove disastrous for Pakistan whose security and prosperity is directly linked to a peaceful and prosperous Afghanistan. In conclusion, this paper postulates that the opposing national interests and deep mistrust between Pakistan and India, have led to an inversely proportional Pak-Afghan and Indo-Afghan relationship, which is unlikely to change in the near future.

## Notes and References

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