



Understanding the Taliban's Geopolitical Influence: A Case Study of Pakistan

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Abstract

This study examines the evolving geopolitical consequences of Taliban rule in Afghanistan for neighboring Pakistan, focusing on border security, regional diplomacy, and internal policy dynamics. Drawing on qualitative interviews with policymakers, local administrators, academics, and civil society actors in Pakistan's frontier regions, the research reveals that the Taliban's return to power has not yielded the strategic gains Pakistan had anticipated. Instead, it has led to heightened insecurity along the Durand Line, increased militant activity, and growing diplomatic isolation. The Taliban's refusal to formally recognize the Durand Line and their ideological alignment with militant groups have further strained Pakistan's sovereignty and border control mechanisms. Moreover, the Taliban's independent foreign policy and resistance to external influence challenge Pakistan's long-standing assumptions of strategic depth. Utilizing critical geopolitical theory and border studies, this paper highlights the spatial and ideological tensions shaping contemporary Pakistan-Taliban relations and underscores the need for a recalibrated, inclusive, and regionally cooperative approach to Afghanistan.

Keywords: Taliban, Pakistan, Durand Line, Border Security, Critical Geopolitics, Regional Diplomacy, Strategic Depth, TTP, Non-State Governance, Afghanistan-Pakistan Relations

Introduction

The return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 marked a pivotal shift in the geopolitical dynamics of South and Central Asia. The abrupt withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces ended a two-decade-long intervention and allowed the Taliban, now often referred to as the "Neo-Taliban," to establish de facto rule over Afghanistan. While this transition was largely viewed as a regional security concern, for Pakistan the Taliban's long-time neighbor and strategic interlocutor, the implications were both immediate and complex. Islamabad was among the first to engage diplomatically with the new regime, motivated by the expectation that a Taliban-led Afghanistan would provide a cooperative buffer state, reduce Indian influence in Kabul, and support regional connectivity through projects such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). However, these expectations have not materialized as anticipated. Instead of reinforcing Pakistan's strategic position, the Taliban's return has generated a new wave of uncertainty. Cross-border militant activity, especially from the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), has intensified. Pakistan's western border provinces have witnessed renewed instability, forcing Islamabad to conduct military operations and tighten border controls. Simultaneously, the refugee influx and the Taliban's reluctance to recognize the Durand Line as an international border have further strained bilateral relations. Despite Islamabad's initial optimism, the Taliban government has

demonstrated an independent and at times unpredictable foreign policy posture, including outreach to India and resistance to Pakistani security demands. This paper examines the geopolitical consequences of the Taliban's rise for Pakistan through a qualitative case study. Unlike much of the existing literature that focuses on Afghanistan's internal governance or U.S. foreign policy failures, this study centers Pakistan as the subject of analysis. Drawing on primary interviews with Pakistani academics, policymakers, border security officials, and residents in frontier districts, the research explores how Pakistan's geopolitical strategies have been challenged, reshaped, or undermined by the Taliban regime. Guided by the framework of critical geopolitics, this paper argues that the Taliban, as a quasi-state actor, exercises a spatial and political influence that reconfigures conventional notions of border control, strategic depth, and regional connectivity. The Taliban's ideological rigidity, contested territoriality, and ambiguous international standing present Pakistan with a unique geopolitical dilemma one that blurs the boundaries between friend, buffer, and threat.

Background of the Study

The geopolitical landscape of South and Central Asia underwent a dramatic transformation following the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in August 2021. With the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces, Afghanistan transitioned from a Western-backed republic into an Islamic emirate governed by a non-democratically elected, ideologically rigid group. This shift not only altered the internal dynamics of Afghanistan but also recalibrated regional balances of power most notably for neighboring Pakistan. Historically, Pakistan has maintained a complex and often contradictory relationship with the Taliban. During the 1990s, Islamabad was one of only three governments to officially recognize the first Taliban regime, and in the years since, its security and intelligence agencies have been accused of offering strategic depth to Taliban factions in pursuit of regional influence, particularly against Indian presence in Afghanistan. The collapse of the Ghani-led Afghan government and the rapid Taliban resurgence were initially interpreted by Pakistani policymakers as a strategic victory an opportunity to secure a friendly regime in Kabul, resolve longstanding disputes such as the Durand Line, and reorient regional trade corridors through the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). However, these assumptions have proven overly optimistic. The Taliban's refusal to formally recognize the Durand Line, the resurgence of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) activities from Afghan soil, and the regime's apparent reluctance to cooperate on trade and security issues have generated tension between Islamabad and Kabul. Instead of achieving geopolitical stability and enhanced leverage, Pakistan now faces a paradoxical situation: it shares a border with an ideologically aligned yet diplomatically defiant neighbor, whose internal dynamics increasingly spill over into Pakistani territory. From a political geography perspective, this case illustrates the challenges that arise when a non-state or quasi-state actor assumes territorial control and exercises sovereignty without international recognition or institutional capacity. The Afghanistan–Pakistan border, long characterized by informality, tribal affiliations, and contested legitimacy, has become a critical zone where geopolitical narratives, security strategies, and national identities collide. It is within this volatile context that Pakistan is forced to re-evaluate its strategic assumptions, border policies, and regional role. This study seeks to explore the geopolitical implications of Taliban rule for Pakistan through a grounded, interview-based analysis. By focusing on the lived experiences of officials, academics, and borderland communities, the research aims to uncover how Pakistan's geography, sovereignty, and strategic calculus are being reshaped by developments in post-2021 Afghanistan.

Problem Statement

The re-establishment of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in 2021 has introduced a new and uncertain phase in South Asia's geopolitical order. While Pakistan initially perceived the Taliban's return as an opportunity to secure strategic depth, diminish Indian influence in Kabul, and stabilize its western frontier, the reality has been far more complex and adverse. Contrary to Islamabad's expectations, the Taliban government has resisted formal recognition of the Durand Line, tolerated the resurgence of anti-Pakistan militant groups such as the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and failed to cooperate meaningfully in regional connectivity initiatives like CPEC. These developments have undermined Pakistan's traditional border strategy, intensified internal security challenges, and complicated its regional diplomacy. Despite the growing geopolitical tension, there remains a significant gap in the scholarly literature regarding how Taliban rule is actively reshaping Pakistan's spatial governance, territorial control, and geopolitical calculus. Most existing studies focus either on internal Afghan politics or the global implications of U.S. withdrawal, with limited empirical attention to Pakistan's evolving role as a neighbor and stakeholder in a post-republic Afghanistan. This study addresses that gap by critically examining the Taliban's geopolitical influence on Pakistan through the lens of critical geopolitics and border studies. It asks: How is the Taliban's return to power affecting Pakistan's geopolitical positioning, border securitization, refugee governance, and regional strategy? The research employs qualitative methods, including interviews with policy experts, border officials, and community members in Pakistan's frontier areas, to understand the spatial and political consequences of Taliban rule for Pakistan.

Significance of the Study

This study holds both academic and policy relevance, as it addresses a critical yet underexplored dimension of post-2021 South Asian geopolitics: the impact of Taliban rule in Afghanistan on Pakistan's geopolitical strategy, border security, and regional connectivity. While much scholarly attention has been devoted to the U.S. withdrawal and the Taliban's internal governance challenges, there remains a lack of empirical and theoretical engagement with how this transformation is reshaping spatial politics along the Afghanistan–Pakistan border. From an academic standpoint, the study contributes to the growing literature in critical geopolitics, border studies, and postcolonial territoriality by examining how a non-traditional regime the Taliban alters neighboring state behavior, territorial control, and security arrangements. By grounding the analysis in interviews and local perspectives from Pakistan's frontier regions, the research moves beyond elite-centric narratives and offers a geographically situated understanding of power, resistance, and instability. For policymakers and security analysts, the study provides timely insights into the strategic misalignments between Islamabad's expectations and the Taliban's actions. It highlights the unintended consequences of supporting ideological proxies and underscores the limitations of traditional strategic depth paradigms in an era of asymmetric threats and shifting regional alliances. Moreover, the findings can inform Pakistan's evolving border policies, refugee management strategies, and regional diplomacy, especially as it seeks to navigate its relationships with China, India, and a diplomatically isolated Taliban government. Ultimately, the study helps illuminate how contested borders and unstable regimes produce ripple effects across state boundaries, making it essential for both scholars and decision-makers to understand the geography of power in rapidly changing political environments.

Final Refined Research Questions

How has the Taliban's return to power affected Pakistan's border security?

What are the geopolitical implications of Taliban rule for Pakistan's regional position?

How is the Taliban government perceived within Pakistan's security and policymaking circles?

Limitations of the Study

This study faces several limitations that shaped its scope and findings. First, due to the sensitive security environment and lack of diplomatic engagement, direct access to primary sources in Afghanistan such as Taliban officials and local Afghan respondents, was not possible, restricting cross-border triangulation of perspectives. Second, security constraints along the Durand Line, particularly in volatile areas like North Waziristan and parts of Balochistan, limited fieldwork to relatively safer districts such as Chaman, Loralai, and Quetta, which may not fully represent the broader regional dynamics. Third, the political sensitivity surrounding Taliban–Pakistan relations may have led to response bias among interviewees, particularly government officials, despite assurances of anonymity. Lastly, as a qualitative case study, the research is context-specific and not statistically generalizable; however, its conceptual insights may offer analytical value for understanding similar post-conflict or non-state governance contexts.

Literature Review

The Taliban and Non-State Geopolitics

The Taliban's re-emergence as Afghanistan's de facto rulers represents a paradigmatic case of how non-state or quasi-state actors challenge classical geopolitical norms. Rather than fitting neatly into the Westphalian model of statehood, the Taliban project power through ideological sovereignty, cross-border alliances, and informal governance structures. Scholars in *Political Geography* have examined how such actors destabilize spatial and political orders, especially in regions where borders are historically porous and contested (Dalby, 2020). Following the 2021 U.S. withdrawal, Afghanistan transitioned from a Western-aligned republic into a theocratic emirate. Yet, the Taliban's influence extends beyond Afghanistan's borders. Similar to past studies on Hezbollah or the Kurdish PKK, the Taliban exemplify what Megoran (2006) calls "border-thickening actors" groups whose ideational and territorial reach intensifies border contestation rather than resolving it. For Pakistan, this means navigating a relationship with a regime that both enables and undermines its strategic calculations.

The Durand Line as a Contested Border

The Afghanistan–Pakistan border, demarcated by the 1893 Durand Agreement, remains one of the most geopolitically sensitive frontiers in South Asia. From a critical geopolitics' perspective, this border is more than a line it is a site of political narratives, violent performances, and spatial ordering (Gregory, 2004). The Taliban's continued refusal to formally recognize the Durand Line as an international boundary reinforces Pakistan's anxieties about sovereignty and state identity. Research has shown that contested borders are often entangled in broader projects of national legitimacy and postcolonial resistance (Newman, 2006). As Pakistan fences the entire 2,600 km border to curb militant infiltration and smuggling, it is performing a "territorial fix" (Painter, 2010) to assert its spatial authority. Yet, these state efforts are persistently undermined by Taliban rhetoric, local Pashtun mobility, and informal economies that thrive on cross-border fluidity (Jones, 2012).

Militancy and Border Securitization

Border securitization under Taliban rule has not produced the anticipated peace dividend for Pakistan. On the contrary, militant groups such as the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) have found sanctuary in Taliban-controlled territories, triggering Pakistani military responses and straining diplomatic ties. Research in *Political Geography* has emphasized how borders are simultaneously sites of security production and insecurity reproduction (Mountz, 2010).

Pakistan's militarized borderlands particularly in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have evolved into complex "borderlands of exception" (Gregory & Pred, 2007), where state sovereignty is asserted through both surveillance and abandonment. Interviews with Pakistani security officials consistently highlight how Taliban rule has complicated efforts to contain transnational insurgencies, destabilizing Islamabad's border governance strategy.

Geopolitical Realignments and Regional Connectivity

The Taliban's ascent has also recalibrated regional alignments. While Pakistan initially welcomed the regime change as a strategic victory, recent scholarship underscores the limits of influence in asymmetric alliances (Toal, 2017). Taliban foreign policy has shown unexpected autonomy, including outreach to India and muted support for Chinese economic interests in Afghanistan. This has placed Pakistan in a precarious position, wedged between an ideologically rigid neighbor and shifting great-power dynamics. From a political geography lens, Afghanistan under the Taliban represents what Agnew (2003) calls a "territorial trap": a space that is politically significant but difficult to govern, diplomatically unstable, and economically unreliable. Pakistan's ambitions to transform itself into a regional connectivity hub via the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) face new constraints due to the Taliban's unpredictable governance structure and lack of international legitimacy.

Gap in the Literature

Despite a growing body of research on Afghanistan's political transitions and the Taliban's return to power, limited scholarly attention has been directed toward the geopolitical consequences of Taliban rule for neighboring Pakistan particularly from a spatial and critical geopolitical perspective. Existing literature predominantly focuses on themes such as the U.S. withdrawal and the Taliban's internal governance, the humanitarian crisis and international recognition issues facing Afghanistan, and Pakistan's historical role in the formation and support of the Taliban. However, few studies critically examine how the Taliban's de facto control over Afghanistan has reshaped Pakistan's border policies, regional strategy, and spatial sovereignty, particularly through the lens of critical geopolitics and border theory.

The Durand Line's continued status as a geopolitical fault line—especially in light of the Taliban's resistance to formally recognizing it also remains under-theorized. Furthermore, there is a notable lack of empirical research grounded in primary sources, such as interviews with policymakers, local communities, and security personnel in Pakistan's border regions. Much of the existing scholarship remains elite-centric or externally focused, often overlooking how Taliban governance is locally experienced and how it affects Pakistan's internal and external spatial politics. This study seeks to fill these gaps by applying critical geopolitical theory to analyze Taliban-Pakistan relations, incorporating borderland perspectives through qualitative fieldwork, and investigating how non-state governance in Afghanistan influences the territorial and diplomatic behavior of a neighboring state. In doing so, the research offers a more grounded and nuanced understanding of regional power dynamics, border contestation, and the evolving geopolitics of South Asian region.

Main Argument:

This study argues that the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan has undermined Pakistan's geopolitical strategy by intensifying border insecurity, weakening Islamabad's regional leverage, and exposing the failure of long-held doctrines like strategic depth. Contrary to expectations of influence, Pakistan faces a Taliban regime that is ideologically aligned but diplomatically independent reshaping traditional state-to-state dynamics and reinforcing the need for a strategic reset in Pakistan's Afghanistan policy.

Theoretical Framework**Critical theory of geopolitics**

This study is grounded in the tradition of critical geopolitics, which interrogates how political actors construct and contest spatial narratives of power, borders, and state identity (Tuathail & Agnew, 1992). Unlike classical geopolitics, which often treats states as rational and territorial units operating in a fixed space, critical geopolitics emphasizes the discursive, constructed, and contested nature of geopolitical relations. It is particularly useful for analyzing the spatial influence of non-traditional actors such as the Taliban, who operate outside conventional norms of state diplomacy, yet wield significant territorial and ideological power. A central concept in this framework is "bordering" the process by which borders are not only drawn and defended, but continuously redefined through practices of inclusion, exclusion, securitization, and identity-making (Newman, 2006). The Afghanistan–Pakistan border (Durand Line) is more than a line on the map; it is a contested zone of governance, legitimacy, and mobility. The Taliban's rejection of this border as a formal international boundary, and their tolerance of cross-border militancy, disrupt Pakistan's spatial strategies and challenge its attempts to territorialize state power through fencing, surveillance, and deportation. The study also draws on postcolonial geopolitical theory, particularly the concept of the "territorial trap" (Agnew, 2003). This refers to the flawed assumption that all political power and legitimacy operate within clearly bounded, sovereign states. The Taliban's rule undermines these assumptions by projecting power without international recognition, blurring the boundaries between non-state actor and state authority. For Pakistan, this creates a strategic paradox: it must deal with a regime that is territorially entrenched but diplomatically invisible, ideologically similar yet operationally uncontrollable. This study draws upon several key concepts within critical geopolitical theory to analyze the evolving dynamics between the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and Pakistan's geopolitical and spatial strategies. Central to this framework is Border Theory, as articulated by scholars like David Newman and Alison Mountz, which emphasizes that borders are not static lines but are socially and politically constructed through practices such as securitization, identity formation, and mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. Additionally, the concept of the Territorial Trap, introduced by John Agnew, challenges the conventional notion that political power is solely exercised by sovereign states within clearly defined boundaries. This is especially relevant in the context of the Taliban, a non-state actor exerting de facto control over a nation-state.

The study also incorporates Postcolonial Geopolitics, which critiques how colonial legacies such as the Durand Line continue to shape present-day power relations, contestations over territory, and governance structures in the region. Critical geopolitics is particularly well-suited for this research because it enables an analysis of how Taliban rule disrupts Pakistan's spatial strategy, particularly

in relation to border management, sovereignty, and regional security. It also allows for an interrogation of dominant geopolitical narratives such as those framing Afghanistan as a “strategic depth,” a “buffer zone,” or a “brotherly regime” and how these discourses often unravel in the face of political realities. Furthermore, this approach highlights the role of non-state actors like the Taliban in redefining regional political geography and influencing state behavior, offering a nuanced understanding of the complexities shaping South Asian geopolitics.

By applying these theoretical lenses, the study critically examines how Pakistan navigates a volatile geopolitical landscape where borders are fluid, sovereignty is challenged, and regional power relations are shifting. This framework provides the analytical foundation for interpreting how Taliban rule has reshaped Pakistan’s geopolitical behavior, security posture, and border governance.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to investigate how the Taliban’s return to power in Afghanistan is influencing Pakistan’s geopolitical strategy, border security, and regional role. A case study design is particularly appropriate for exploring complex political and spatial phenomena situated in a specific geographic and temporal context (Yin, 2018).

Data Collection

Primary data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews with key informants in Pakistan, employing a purposive sampling strategy to ensure a diverse range of insights. A total of 10–12 participants were selected across four main groups: academics and policy analysts specializing in South Asian geopolitics; security officials both retired and currently serving who possess firsthand knowledge of Pakistan–Afghanistan border management; local administrators and refugee management personnel operating in border districts such as Chaman and Loralai; and residents and community leaders living in proximity to the Durand Line. Interviews were conducted either in person or via secure online platforms, depending on accessibility and security considerations. All interviews were recorded with the participants’ consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Prior to participation, each interviewee was provided with an informed consent form and fully briefed on the voluntary and confidential nature of the study, ensuring adherence to ethical research standards.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic coding in NVivo 14, guided by Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step method of thematic analysis. Coding was approached both deductively based on the core research questions and inductively, allowing themes to emerge organically from patterns observed in the data. Key thematic categories identified included border security and control, regional diplomacy and geopolitical realignment, perceptions of Taliban governance, and refugee flows and their local impacts. To support thematic insights and enhance data visualization, NVivo’s visual tools such as word clouds and tree maps were employed to highlight frequently occurring terms and conceptual interconnections. Ethical considerations were central to the research process. Data were securely stored, and particular attention was given to safeguarding the privacy of individuals in sensitive roles or high-risk border areas, ensuring they could share their

perspectives without fear of exposure or retaliation. The current study contains primary sources of data. Primary source is semi-structured interviews via purposive or judgmental sampling, and secondary source is content analysis. In this research, the researcher has taken the interviews of experts via judgmental or purposive sampling because his research topic was about “Understanding the Taliban’s Geopolitical Influence: A Case Study of Pakistan”. So, for this purpose a semi-structured interview questionnaire was developed. Before the commencement of data collection, first and foremost the researcher has strived to find the experts, experts are all those who have the knowledge of USA, Pakistan, Afghanistan and about the area of the researcher. After that the researcher got access and the experts were interviewed. By purposive sampling the researcher went for the initial contacts, then he knew about the rest of the experts. So, he asked them for naming the rest of important persons who are contributing in policy making processes. For achieving easy access to meet with interviewees the strategies and tactics of text messages, making phone calls, taking time, cordial environment, probing was used. The interviews were taken from experts including politicians, journalists, academicians, tribal elders, and political workers. As mostly interviews have taken at the evening time because at that time experts were free. For the interview, the time was already fixed via telephone and text messages. Later, the researcher went to their homes and offices to conduct practically their interviews. The experts who were too busy or out of station or vary far especially from Afghanistan were interviewed via telephone call, WhatsApp and Zoom.

How has the Taliban’s return to power affected Pakistan’s border security?

The return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 has not led to the enhanced border stability that many in Pakistan’s security and policy establishment had initially hoped for. Instead, it has introduced new layers of complexity to Pakistan’s already volatile western frontier. Senator Sardar Yaqoob Khan Nasar, a seasoned politician and former president of the Pakistan Muslim League (N), pointed out that although the Taliban’s ascension was perceived as a strategic win for Pakistan, the reality has diverged sharply. According to him, incidents of cross-border firing, infiltration by militant elements, and the reactivation of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) activities along the border have actually increased. This indicates that the Taliban either lacks full control over Afghanistan’s peripheral territories or is unwilling to confront groups that target Pakistan (Nasar, 2024).

Aziz Phatan, Chairman of the Municipal Committee Loralai, with 35 years of direct involvement in managing refugee affairs, highlighted how the porous nature of the Durand Line continues to undermine Pakistan’s control. Despite the substantial fencing efforts undertaken by the Pakistani military,

he argued that unregulated crossings persist, driven by familial ties, informal trade, and militant networks. Phatan emphasized that the fencing has not stopped the movement but has only made it more covert, pushing many activities underground and increasing tension in local communities (Pathan, 2024).

Manzoor Ahmed Khan Kakar, a lawyer and district president of the Awami National Party (ANP), argued that the Taliban's ideological affinity with militant groups in Pakistan has indirectly empowered extremist actors. He noted that there has been a visible rise in local radicalization, especially in border districts, which has added a layer of internal insecurity to the external threat (Kakar, 2024).

Malak Amanat Hussain Kakazai, a journalist and businessman, provided a more grassroots perspective, observing increased smuggling, illegal trade, and arms trafficking since the Taliban takeover. He noted that the absence of regulatory enforcement on the Afghan side has created a haven for criminal networks, undermining border stability (Hussain, 2024).

Sher Ahmed Durani, a political scientist, added that the Taliban's refusal to formally recognize the Durand Line creates a grey zone in Pakistan's territorial sovereignty. He stressed that this ambiguity fosters insecurity, as the border is seen as both disputed and permeable, weakening Pakistan's claim to unchallenged control over its western frontier (Durrani, 2024).

In summary, most respondents agreed that instead of securing the border, the Taliban's rise has led to a deterioration in Pakistan's border security due to increased militant activity, informal movements, and unresolved territorial claims.

What are the geopolitical implications of Taliban rule for Pakistan's regional position?

Respondents consistently emphasized that Taliban rule in Afghanistan has placed Pakistan in a geopolitically awkward position caught between the expectations of influence and the realities of diminished control and increased regional distrust.

Mr. Sher Ahmed Durani, an expert in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, stated that Pakistan initially perceived the Taliban's return as an opportunity to assert greater influence in regional affairs, particularly by curbing Indian presence in Afghanistan and strengthening Islamabad's strategic depth. However, he explained that this expectation has not materialized. The Taliban have pursued an independent foreign policy and have not shown a willingness to align fully with Pakistan's strategic objectives (Durrani, 2024).

Senator Yaqoob Khan Nasar echoed this sentiment by pointing out that the Taliban's unwillingness to crack down on anti-Pakistan militant groups has not only strained bilateral relations but has also raised suspicions among other regional actors. As a result, Pakistan has lost credibility among its international partners, who view it as having misjudged the Taliban's trajectory (Nasar, 2024).

Munawar Khan Aryan, a member of the central executive committee of the Pakhtunkhwa Milli Awami Party (PKMAP), highlighted how the Taliban's control has marginalized local ethnic and nationalist movements, particularly among the Pashtuns. He argued that Pakistan's continued engagement with the Taliban at the expense of broader Afghan representation weakens its regional image and reinforces the perception of interference in Afghanistan's internal affairs (Aryan, 2024).

Molvi Shams Ul Haq, representing a religious seminary, offered a contrasting view, suggesting that the Taliban's Islamic governance presents an ideological alignment with Pakistan's religious right. However, even he admitted that the lack of international recognition and diplomatic flexibility on the part of the Taliban limits any constructive regional diplomacy (Haq, 2024).

Professor Abdul Karim Aamir, a Pashto literature scholar, provided a cultural and historical analysis, stating that the Taliban's return has reignited trans-border Pashtun identity debates, which complicate Pakistan's national narrative and policy goals. He emphasized that Pakistan's attempt to manage Afghanistan as a strategic backyard ignores these deeper cultural and historical dynamics, leading to political friction (Amir, 2024).

Collectively, the geopolitical implications of Taliban rule appear to have complicated Pakistan's regional strategy rather than reinforcing it. Respondents suggest that rather

than gaining strategic depth, Pakistan faces greater instability, diplomatic isolation, and increased pressure from neighboring states to recalibrate its Afghan policy.

How is the Taliban government perceived within Pakistan's security and policymaking circles?

Perceptions of the Taliban within Pakistan's decision-making circles have shifted notably since August 2021, from cautious optimism to growing disillusionment. This evolution is reflected in the nuanced insights shared by the interviewees.

Senator Yaqoob Khan Nasar noted that many in Pakistan's military and intelligence community initially viewed the Taliban as a strategic ally who would support Pakistan's interests in the region, particularly against India. However, as Taliban policies proved less predictable and their support for cross-border militancy continued, confidence began to erode. He argued that while public statements remained diplomatic, privately there is increasing frustration within official circles over the Taliban's unwillingness to cooperate on key security issues (Nasar, 2024).

Painda Khan, a researcher from Kabul, emphasized that Pakistan's assumption of control or heavy influence over the Taliban was flawed from the outset. According to him, the Taliban leadership has consistently demonstrated nationalist tendencies and a resistance to being seen as subordinate to any foreign power, including Pakistan. This miscalculation, he argued, has created a credibility gap between Pakistan and both the Taliban and the international community (Khan, 2024).

Aziz Phatan observed that at the local governance level, there is a sense of burden rather than partnership. Municipal authorities, he said, are overwhelmed with managing Afghan refugee flows and undocumented movements, with little coordination or support from Kabul. This has generated skepticism about whether the Taliban can function as a reliable state actor (Pathan, 2024).

Manzoor Ahmed Khan Kakar added that from the standpoint of progressive political actors, the Taliban are seen as a regression to a more authoritarian, intolerant mode of governance. He noted that many within Pakistan's civil society and opposition parties view the Taliban's influence

as destabilizing, both ideologically and politically (Kakar, 2024).

Professor Abdul Karim Aamir mentioned that within academic and intellectual communities, the Taliban are generally seen as a challenge to modern education, freedom of expression, and regional cultural integration. These views are echoed in university circles, where there is concern over the spread of conservative ideologies (Amir, 2024).

Taken together, these insights indicate that while some initial segments of Pakistan's establishment saw the Taliban's return as a strategic win, their current standing is marked by increasing distrust, concern, and recognition of a rapidly changing ground reality. The Taliban are now perceived less as an asset and more as a complex, independent actor whose governance style and foreign policy choices often conflict with Pakistan's strategic interests.

Findings of the research

Taliban's return to power affected Pakistan's border security

The interviews revealed that the Taliban's return to power in August 2021 has significantly complicated, rather than stabilized, Pakistan's border security landscape. While initial expectations within Pakistani strategic circles anticipated improved cooperation along the Durand Line, developments on the ground have challenged these assumptions. Many respondents observed a notable increase in cross-border infiltration, militant movements, and activities linked to groups like the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). There was widespread concern that the Taliban either lacks the capacity or the political will to prevent such groups from operating near the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. The continuation of unregulated cross-border movement despite Pakistan's investment in fencing and surveillance was frequently mentioned, with interviewees noting that these measures have merely forced movement into more covert and untraceable channels. Several participants highlighted that ideological proximity between the Taliban and militant factions in Pakistan has led to a rise in localized radicalization, particularly in frontier regions. Additionally, the return of smuggling, arms trafficking, and other forms of illegal trade were cited as symptoms of a broader breakdown in border management. The Taliban's refusal to recognize the Durand Line as an official international boundary was seen as a further source of strategic ambiguity, undermining Pakistan's control and sovereignty in the borderlands. Collectively, these findings indicate that Taliban rule has exacerbated rather than mitigated border instability.

Geopolitical implications of Taliban rule for Pakistan's regional position?

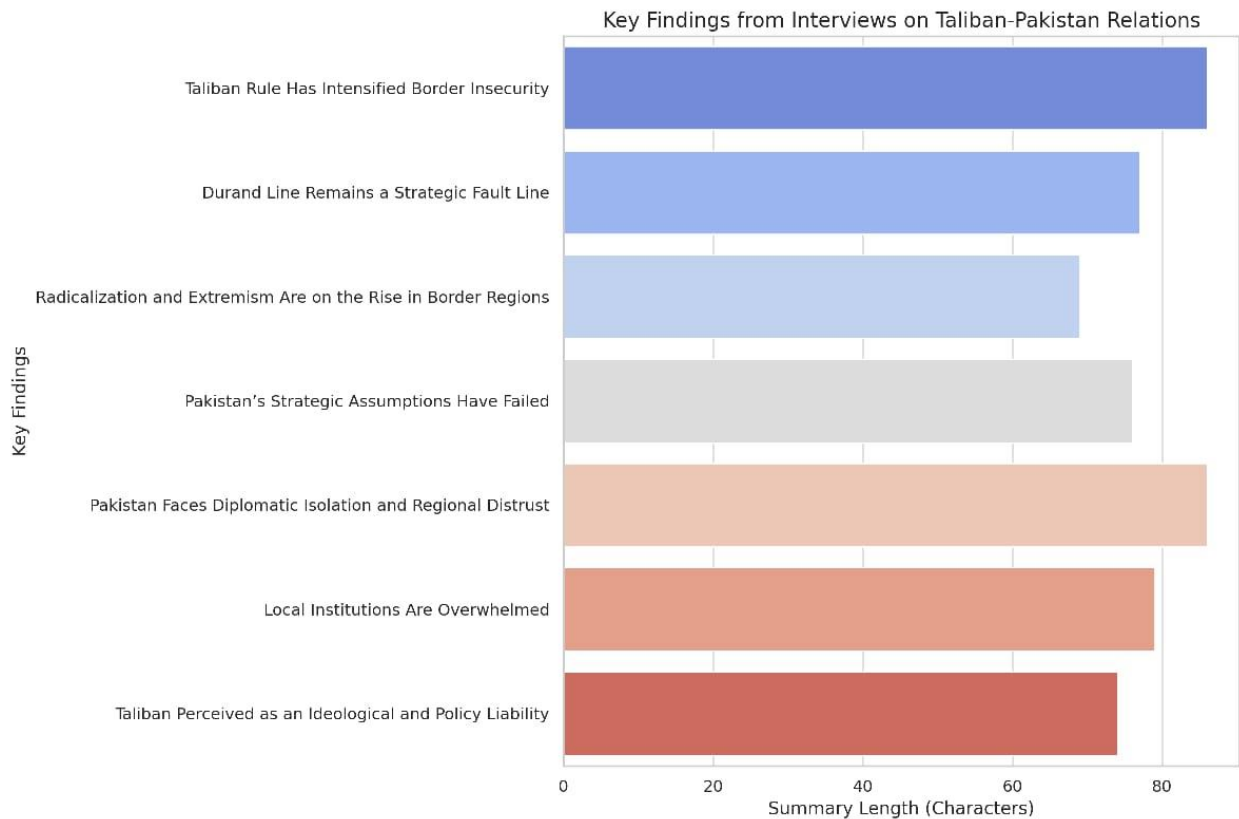
The return of the Taliban has introduced new geopolitical challenges for Pakistan, complicating its regional standing and undermining earlier strategic assumptions. Interviewees widely agreed that Pakistan had initially perceived the Taliban's takeover as a geopolitical victory believing it would enhance its regional leverage, reduce Indian influence in Kabul, and allow Pakistan to project strategic depth. However, the Taliban's behavior since assuming power has not aligned with these expectations. Participants described the Taliban's foreign policy as largely independent and unpredictable, with limited alignment to Pakistani interests. The group's unwillingness to act

against anti-Pakistan militant organizations has strained bilateral relations and raised doubts among regional and international actors about Pakistan's ability to influence developments in Afghanistan. These dynamics have not only weakened Islamabad's traditional narrative of control over Afghan affairs but have also contributed to diplomatic isolation and mistrust from neighboring powers and global partners.

The Taliban's consolidation of power has also been seen as a source of ethnic and political exclusion, particularly regarding Pashtun representation. Respondents noted that Pakistan's continued engagement with the Taliban, rather than with a broader spectrum of Afghan actors, has reinforced perceptions of interference and damaged its credibility in the region. Although some viewed the Taliban's Islamic governance model as ideologically resonant with conservative currents in Pakistan, the lack of international legitimacy and their rigid stance on diplomacy were seen as obstacles to meaningful regional cooperation. Overall, Taliban rule has complicated Pakistan's geopolitical positioning, reducing its strategic options and increasing the need for a policy recalibration.

Taliban government perceived within Pakistan's security and policymaking circles

Perceptions of the Taliban government among Pakistani stakeholders have evolved significantly since August 2021. The early optimism that accompanied the Taliban's return to power has been gradually replaced by skepticism and concern. Interviewees indicated that while elements of Pakistan's security and intelligence establishment initially viewed the Taliban as a strategic partner who could support Islamabad's regional agenda, this perception has not held up in practice. There is a growing realization that the Taliban operates with a high degree of autonomy and does not act in accordance with Pakistani strategic interests. The group's resistance to acting against anti-Pakistan militants, coupled with its emphasis on sovereignty and nationalism, has eroded earlier assumptions about Pakistan's influence over its western neighbor. This has created an internal credibility gap and forced a reassessment of long-standing policy approaches toward Afghanistan. At the local governance level, officials expressed a sense of administrative burden rather than collaboration, particularly in relation to managing undocumented Afghan refugees and cross-border movements. Without coordinated support from the Taliban regime, local institutions remain overwhelmed and vulnerable. Furthermore, progressive political actors and civil society members within Pakistan regard the Taliban's governance model as authoritarian, exclusionary, and ideologically regressive. In academic and intellectual circles, the Taliban are seen as a challenge to regional education, cultural exchange, and democratic values. Concerns were raised about the potential for conservative ideological spillover into Pakistan, which could reverse social and educational progress. In sum, the Taliban are increasingly viewed not as a strategic asset, but as a politically volatile and diplomatically burdensome actor that complicates Pakistan's internal governance and external relations.



Conclusion

The return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan has triggered a profound recalibration of Pakistan's security, diplomatic, and geopolitical calculus. This study, grounded in primary data from a diverse group of stakeholders in Pakistan's border regions, reveals that rather than producing the strategic depth and regional leverage initially anticipated by Pakistani policymakers, Taliban rule has instead exacerbated insecurity, strained bilateral relations, and complicated Pakistan's regional posture. At the core of these dynamics lies the contested and porous Durand Line, which remains a persistent source of instability. Despite major investments in border fencing and surveillance, militant infiltration, informal movement, and illicit trade have persisted, revealing the limitations of securitized border management in the face of enduring tribal, economic, and ideological linkages across the frontier. Moreover, the Taliban's refusal to recognize the Durand Line reinforces territorial ambiguity and undermines Pakistan's claims to sovereign control.

Geopolitically, the Taliban's pursuit of an independent foreign policy has disillusioned Pakistani strategic actors who had expected alignment. Instead of curbing anti-Pakistan elements or acting as a buffer against external threats, the Taliban have proven unpredictable and largely unresponsive to Islamabad's core security concerns. This divergence has reduced Pakistan's credibility regionally and globally, with many observers viewing its Afghan policy as short-sighted and over reliant on a singular actor.

Within Pakistan, perceptions of the Taliban have grown increasingly skeptical. Civil society, academia, and political opposition actors view the group's governance style as regressive, ideologically rigid, and a threat to pluralism, modern education, and internal stability. Local institutions, particularly in Baluchistan's border districts, remain overwhelmed by refugee flows and lack adequate coordination with Afghan authorities.

This study underscores the need for a strategic rethink in Pakistan's approach to Afghanistan. Rather than viewing the Taliban solely through the lens of ideological affinity or strategic utility, Pakistani policymakers must adopt a more nuanced, multilateral, and people-centric engagement strategy. This includes recognizing the importance of inclusive Afghan governance, regional cooperation frameworks, and human security along the border. Only through such a recalibration can Pakistan hope to mitigate.

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