

Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations under PML-N (2013-2018): Foreign Policy Priorities and Key Developments

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Abstract

This article investigates the Pak-Afghan relations dynamics throughout the period of Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) administration (2013–2018). It evaluates the objectives of their foreign policy and significant events that influenced bilateral ties. The PML-N took power in challenging regional security landscape that was under terrorism, political turmoil in neighbor country, Afghanistan, the continuing NATO exit, and shifting geopolitical relations among China, US, and India. This research examines PML-N's diplomatic efforts, security collaboration, and strategic involvement with Afghanistan. The study tried to find out the answer of question that in what manner did the foreign policy objectives of the PML-N influence Pak–Afghan relations, and what significant events impacted bilateral relations during this timeframe? To address this question, the study implied a qualitative research methodology grounded on a descriptive and analytical framework. Both primary and secondary data is used, such as academic journal articles, books, governmental policy documents, official declarations, and party policy. The data undergo qualitative content analysis to discern prevalent themes and Pakistan's interaction with Afghanistan. The study determines that PML-N emphasized regional stability, collaboration in counterterrorism, economic interconnectivity, and diplomatic relations with Afghanistan, but these goals were limited by ongoing security issues, territorial conflicts, reciprocal suspicion, and interference of regional and global entities. This article indicates that PML-N adopted a more assertive diplomatic strategy regarding Afghanistan, systemic and geopolitical obstacles hindered the durability of enhanced bilateral ties.

Keywords: Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations, Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz, Regional Security, Diplomatic Engagement, Foreign Policy Analysis

Introduction and Background

Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz winning in the 2013 elections did not signify a historical reset but rather represented an inheritance of one of the world's most intricate and adversarial bilateral partnerships. Nawaz Sharif needed to manage a legacy characterised not by diplomatic relations but by years of conflict, clandestine interventions, and a security policy that perceived Afghanistan as a geo-political battleground rather than an independent neighbour (Azami, 2013). The historical background was not a passive backdrop but an active, limiting factor that influenced every policy option accessible to the incoming government. The entrenched substrate of suspicion, institutionalized over generations, ensured that the PML-N's attempts would be perceived in Kabul as well as in Rawalpindi, through the lens of activities undertaken prior to 2013 (Taye & Ahmed, 2021). The PPP government inherited a profoundly conflicting

and unstable policy framework. The five-year administration, led by President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Ministers Yousaf Raza Gilani and Raja Pervez Ashraf, was characterised by an escalation of the most detrimental aspects in the relationship, nearing a breaking point. Pakistan was immersed in a severe insurgency by TTP as they had declared war on the state (Khan, 2010). The Pakistani military-initiated operations in FATA, including Operations Rah-e-Nijat (2009) in South Waziristan (Kagan, Szrom, & Jan, 2009). The operations led to extensive internal displacement, resulting in displacement of thousands of civilians (IDPs), alongside considerable civilian casualties and infrastructure devastation Hussain, 2010, p. 129).

The US, exasperated by the Taliban's tenacity and Pakistan's purported duplicity, significantly intensified its drone strike campaign against militant targets in tribal areas. Targeting al-Qaeda and TTP leaders, these strikes were infamously inaccurate, resulting in significant collateral damage and numerous civilian fatalities (International Human Rights and Conflict Resolution Clinic, Stanford Law School, & Global Justice Clinic, NYU School of Law, 2012). For Afghans and their government, the Pakistani military operations and US drone strikes were perceived as interconnected actions (Warraich, 2013). The operations drove militants across the Durand Line, intensifying violence in Afghanistan, while the drone strikes constituted a severe breach of sovereignty, which the Pakistani state was not allowing (Juss & Juss, 2024). President Hamid Karzai's relations with Pakistani government devolved into a deleterious cycle of public hostility. Feeling betrayed by what he perceived as Pakistan's continued backing for the Taliban insurgency undermining his nation. He alleged that Pakistan was engaging in a "double game" and harbouring Taliban leaders such as Mullah Omar in Quetta (Karzai, 2011). The lowest point in diplomatic relations were the assassination in September 2011 of Burhanuddin Rabbani, the head of Afghanistan's High Peace Council and a former president, by a Taliban assassin masquerading as a peace emissary. The bomber was allegedly dispatched from Quetta, and Karzai accused Pakistani intelligence, claiming that peace negotiations "must be held with Pakistan, not the Taliban" (BBC News, 2011a). The frontier evolved into a tense and dynamic military front when NATO and Afghan forces frequently alleged that Pakistani border troops offered supporting artillery fire for Taliban terrorists infiltrating Afghanistan. Contrary to that, Pakistani military accused Afghan and NATO forces of cross-border shelling, often as retaliation for militant assaults originating from Pakistani territory (BBC News, 2011b). The November 2011 NATO airstrike on Salala resulted in the deaths of 24 Pakistani soldiers, brought the two nations to the precipice of a broader conflict and compelled Pakistan to suspend critical NATO supply lines for seven months (Al Jazeera, 2011). At the end of PPP government, the relationship was marked by a near-total erosion of trust, entrenched mutual animosity at both public and elite levels, and a border that was simultaneously porous for militants and violently contested by state forces. The PML-N was inherited a significant diplomatic and security catastrophe.

Foreign Policy Priorities of the PML-N Government

Amidst this context of significant dysfunction, the PML-N winning established a novel array of political agendas and a unique leadership approach. These concerns operated within a complex and frequent contentious interaction with the persistent frameworks of national security policy. Comprehending these conflicts between Nawaz Sharif's economic vision and the military establishment were crucial for analysing the contradictions and results of the PML-N's Afghanistan strategy.

Economic Rejuvenation via Central Asia and Regional Interconnectivity

The PML-N's mandate was predominantly economic as party secured victory on a platform focused on revitalising a stagnating economy, addressing a severe electricity shortage, and initiating an extensive infrastructure construction program (Salman, Ahmad, Javed, & Riaz, 2013). Nawaz Sharif was perceived as a "doer" by public, a manager capable of restoring electricity and reconstructing infrastructure (*The Economist*, 2013). The government's primary

focus was obtaining a financial bailout from the IMF, enticing foreign investment, and initiating prominent projects such as the Lahore Metro Bus (Iqbal, Usman, & Shahzad, 2022). This domestic economic necessity had significant implications for foreign policy, especially for Afghanistan. A fundamental component of the PML-N's long-term strategy was to convert Pakistan as a centre for regional trade, transit, and energy corridors. In this perspective, Afghanistan was not simply a neighbouring state with a security dilemma but also an essential geographical conduit to the landlocked, resource-abundant markets of Central Asia (Yusuf, 2013). The Pakistani commodities' trade to Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, alongside the transit of Central Asian electricity, natural gas, and hydrocarbons southward to Pakistani ports and industries was a formidable economic attraction. Initiatives such as TAPI gas pipeline and CASA-1000 electricity transmission line were revived in policy deliberations (Saleem, 2018). The pinnacle of this economic strategy was CPEC, officially ratified in 2013 and initiated in 2015; a bilateral project with China possessed a strategic rationale that included a Western aspect (Wolf, 2020, p. 185). A stable Afghanistan was perceived as a prospective extension of CPEC, connecting it to Central Asian markets and offering Afghanistan an alternative seaport through Gwadar, thereby diminishing its reliance on Iranian or Pakistani ports such as Karachi (Amir, 2016). The economic strength of western border was an economic imperative, but instability deterred foreign direct investment, obstructed lawful cross-border business and impeded the profitable north-south trade routes (Nabi & Shaikh, 2013). This strategy provided Sharif government a compelling new justification for pursuing stability in Afghanistan, one grounded in trade and connectivity rather than exclusively in security and influence. It indicated a possible change in the perception of Afghanistan among Pakistani policymaking circles.

Predominance of Military on Security and Foreign Policy

Notwithstanding the PML-N's parliamentary majority and Nawaz Sharif's personal influence, the constitutional and *de-facto* oversight of Afghanistan policy, national security strategy, and interactions with militant organisations remained predominantly within the purview of the military establishment. This pertained not only to the Pakistan Army as an organisation but specifically to the senior leadership, including COAS and the principal commanders, as well as ISI directorate. The military's dominance in "Af-Pak" relations was institutional, historical, and operational. It had overseen the relationship for four decades, retained all intelligence on militant organisations and transnational movements, and sustained direct, on-site connections with Taliban (Shah, 2014, p. 248). The military's strategic culture marked as a continual sense of insecurity stemming from the partition of India and a zero-sum perspective on regional politics (Fair, 2014, p. 10). From GHQ Rawalpindi, Afghanistan was primarily perceived as a strategic territory to be controlled in order to preclude India's influence and to secure "strategic depth." The military's objectives were unequivocal: to prevent any Afghan government from permitting India to establish permanent military installation. Its operating priorities were likewise unique. It was ultimately convinced to initiate a significant operation in North Waziristan named as Zarb-e-Azb in 2014 against the TTP and foreign militants. It continued to exhibit considerable hesitance in taking decisive action against the Haqqani Network, regarded as a disciplined and effective proxy for exerting influence within Afghanistan (Markey, 2013, p. 114). Thus, any civilian diplomatic endeavour was constrained by military parameters. The Prime Minister might offer speeches advocating for peace and receive Afghan presidents but the important decisions for certain Taliban leader's participation in negotiations, whether to disband a Taliban leadership council, or whether to authorise particular military operations, were determined by Rawalpindi (Brunnstrom, 2015). These factors frequently led to a dual or even multi-faceted policy: the Foreign Office conducted formal diplomacy, the Prime Minister's Office undertook political outreach, and the security apparatus operated its own parallel, often conflicting with the Afghan Taliban, the Haqqani Network, and other entities. This structural reality indicated that the PML-N's publicly expressed aspiration for

reconciliation and economic collaboration was consistently mediated by the military's entrenched, pragmatic security considerations (Ali, 2024).

Nawaz Sharif's Personal Preference for Economic Diplomacy and Reconciliation

The political past and inclinations of Nawaz Sharif imparted a distinctive character to his government's strategy. He primarily operated in a transactional manner, emphasising macroeconomic results. He possessed a history of pursuing audacious, personal diplomacy to address deep-seated conflicts such as peace initiative with Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee in 1999, which was severely compromised by Kargil issue (Talbot, 2004, p. 138). These experiences likely solidified two convictions in Sharif: firstly, a profound distrust of the military's capacity to undermine civilian foreign policy and secondly economic interdependence constituted the most reliable avenue to enduring peace (Shah, 2013). In case of Afghanistan, Sharif's personal doctrine predominantly advocated for dialogue and political reconciliation for resolution to on-going conflict. In his first national security address in February 2014, he unequivocally positioned peace as the cornerstone of prosperity adding that the government would welcome all initiatives for peace and the dialogue should be Afghan-owned and Afghan-led (Sharif, 2014). He perceived himself capable for utilizing Pakistan's historical connections to the Taliban not to sustain conflict, but to facilitate a political resolution (BBC News, 2014). His proposed to entail a comprehensive government in Kabul, incorporating reconciled Taliban factions, that would renounce violence, acknowledge the Durand Line as a *de-facto* border, restrict Indian influence to commercial endeavours, and facilitate regional trade routes (Ali, Qasmi, & Sohail, 2023). This vision was in complete alignment with his economic objective. This personal predilection coexisted in a nuanced and frequently contentious relationship with the military system as there was a superficial agreement on the objective of a political settlement in Afghanistan, the envisioned outcome varied considerably (European Foundation for South Asian Studies [EFSAS], n.d.). His perspective appeared more adaptable, emphasising stability for commerce while military was inflexible, insisting on an agreement that explicitly limited Indian influence and guaranteed a preeminent position for Pakistan's Taliban affiliates (Ali et al., 2023). The conflict between Prime Minister's approach and Army Chief's was economic based and security-oriented limitations vice versa. The divide in the PML-N's policy towards Afghanistan elucidated the government's unpredictable oscillations between assertive peace overtures and phases of inaction, as the civilian and military power centres endeavoured to reconcile their divergent perspectives on Pakistan's western frontier.

Key Phases and Events

The PML-N government's Afghanistan strategy had a dramatic trajectory of heightened optimism followed by a sharp downturn and strategic reassessment. The period was characterized by non-linear advancement, punctuated by significant phases and influenced by leadership transitions in Kabul. The Taliban's internal dynamics and increasing U.S. pressure also affected this. Each step elucidated the interaction between Pakistan's strategic aims and the steadfast realities of Afghan politics and regional geopolitics.

Phase 1: Optimistic Involvement (2013-2014)

First year of government was marked by a deliberate attempt to rectify the detrimental connection acquired from PPP. Nawaz Sharif assumed government with a definitive mandate for economic revitalization that was associated with regional tranquillity. The end of term of Hamid Karzai presented a symbolic chance for renewal, albeit entrenched institutional pessimism from both factions.

Nawaz Sharif's Engagements with President Karzai

Nawaz Sharif sought to cultivate a personal relationship with President Karzai by inviting him to his inaugural speech so Karzai accepted the invitation (BBC News, 2013a) which deviated from the frosty formality of PPP era. In November 2013, Sharif undertook official visit to Kabul, where he intentionally underscored themes of sovereignty and non-interference. He

affirmed that Pakistani Government uphold the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Afghanistan, adding that Pakistan had no preference in Afghanistan and aimed just for a stable, peaceful, united, and prosperous neighbour (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013). These statements were meticulously alleviated Afghan apprehensions of Pakistani influence. Both heads consented to implement the Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA) and to direct their intelligence agencies to improve collaboration (*Dawn*, 2013). Nonetheless, these initiatives were undermined by on-going violence even Sharif and Karzai met, it was alleged that Taliban attacks on Afghanistan purportedly orchestrated from sanctuaries in Pakistan. Karzai's trust was contingent and transactional as he openly stated that the evidence of Pakistan's seriousness would be demonstrated through its actions against Taliban leadership, rather than mere rhetoric (Karzai, 2013).

Endorsement of Afghan-led Initiative and Release of Taliban

To exhibit tangible commitment, PML-N implemented a contentious confidence-building measure by releasing prominent Taliban inmates. The most notable event was the September 2013 release of Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the former deputy of the Taliban (Al Jazeera, 2013). This action, orchestrated with the Afghan High Peace Council and allegedly advocated by the US, aimed to furnish the emerging peace process with Taliban. Here Pakistan established itself as the guardian of a significant resource of peace. In 2014, it enabled the travel of Taliban representatives from its territory to multiple foreign gatherings, including those in China and Qatar (*South China Morning Post*, 2014). This phase concluded with Pakistan publicly supporting the Afghan presidential election 2014, pushing all factions to engage and legitimize the emerging democratic transition (Kuwait News Agency, 2014). Nonetheless, this sympathetic demeanour concealed an inherent tension as it was predicated that it would regulate the tempo of reconciliation and guarantee that its favoured figures, such as Baradar, would helm the Taliban's political faction. These assumptions were shortly be scrutinized and deemed inadequate.

Phase 2: The Ghani-Ashrafullah Administration and Challenges (2014-2016)

The election of Ashraf Ghani as President and establishment of a National Unity Government with Dr. Abdullah Abdullah as Chief Executive, constituted a pivotal turning point in Afghanistan (BBC News, 2014a). Ghani, a former World Bank executive, signified a possible paradigm shift with a pragmatic perspective he was prepared to contest the anti-Pakistan consensus of the Karzai administration in return for tangible collaboration against the Taliban (BBC News, 2015a).

The Preliminary Phase (2014-2015)

President Ghani initiated politically precarious engagement with Pakistan when in November 2014 he selected Islamabad for his first bilateral visit which was a significant symbolic act (*The Guardian*, 2014). He addressed in Pakistan and offered a hand of friendship and pointedly minimized India's involvement, asserting his desire to terminate the blame game (Manan, 2014). In exchange, he insisted for assertive Pakistani measures to compel the Taliban to engage in substantive negotiations and to attack its leadership strongholds. This agreement appeared effective for short term as newly appointed Army Chief General Raheel Sharif seemed receptive while intelligence collaboration increased, and Pakistan openly acknowledged Ghani's outreach as a new beginning (*Dawn*, 2015). The collaboration reached its zenith during Operation Zarb-e-Azb when Pakistan provided intelligence to Afghanistan to thwart TTP fighters from escaping across the border, and there were restricted, albeit inconclusive, coordinated actions along the borderline (Hourelid, 2015). This period was a high-stakes wager for both Ghani and Sharif. Ghani invested his political capital in Pakistani intervention, while Sharif speculated that Ghani's skepticism towards India could alter the regional dynamics.

The Murree Peace Talks (July 2015)

The concrete outcome of collaboration was Murree Peace Talks held on July 7-8, 2015 in which direct negotiations between delegates of the Afghan government and the Taliban held (Goldstein & Mashal, 2015). Chinese and USA diplomats participated as observers, conferring substantial international credibility. This represented the pinnacle of Pakistan's mediation strategy and it effectively utilized its influence to assemble the parties, demonstrating its necessity. The discussions established a framework for subsequent negotiations as Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif lauded them as a breakthrough, while Foreign Secretary Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry asserted that Pakistan had honoured its commitment to help (Al Jazeera, 2015). This process validated Ghani's risk and Pakistan's diplomatic narrative.

Disintegration and Decline (2015-2016)

The downfall was rapid, initiated by a solitary disclosure on July 29, 2015. The Afghan intelligence agency (NDS) validated that Taliban Commander Mullah Omar was deceased for more than two years earlier, (BBC News, 2015b) which shattered Taliban's internal cohesion. A power struggle ensued between Mullah Akhtar Mansoor and others who contested his legitimacy (BBC News, 2015c). The emerging peace process, based on a cohesive Taliban leadership, quickly became obsolete while Taliban party aligned with Mansoor repudiated the Murree negotiations, asserting that its participation was illegal (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2015). The repercussions were disastrous for Pakistan as well as for Ghani's political stature. The new Taliban leadership under Mansoor, aiming to consolidate its power, initiated an unprecedented series of attacks to exhibit strength, including seizure of Kunduz city in September 2015 (Rasmussen, 2015). Experiencing betrayal and humiliation, Ghani's outreach disintegrated and he deduced that Pakistan possessed knowledge of Omar's demise and misled him. In his speech he forsook his conciliatory approach, charging Pakistan of conducting an undeclared war of aggression and harbouring Taliban strongholds (Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2016). He subsequently strengthened and intensified strategic relations with India, including in the execution of a significant air-corridor deal for supply of Indian military helicopters in 2016 (Gady, 2016). During 2016 military tensions intensified when Torkham border clash was held in June, during which Pakistani and Afghan forces participated in a two-day artillery and mortar confrontation on Pakistan's unilateral decision to construct a new border gate and barrier. Numerous soldiers died on both sides that indicated the complete collapse of security collaboration and the return to an antagonistic, militarized border (BBC News, 2016).

Phase 3: Fortification of Positions and Regional Manoeuvring (2016-2018)

After collapse of Ghani strategy and disintegration of reconciliation process, PML-N adopted a defensive and reactionary stance. Islamabad confronted with allegations from both Kabul and Washington and finally adopted a policy focused on fortifying its borders, expanding its diplomatic alliances, and reinforcing its narrative.

Discontent with the "Double Game" Allegation

Pakistan became further embittered by what they perceived as incessant scapegoating. PML-N Government contended that, despite facilitating negotiations, releasing detainees, and executing expensive military operations that displaced over a million of its own inhabitants, Pakistan was solely criticized for Afghanistan's internal security shortcomings (Bennett-Jones, 2017). Army representatives and Foreign Office consistently emphasized Pakistan's sacrifices in the war on terror and cited the existence of anti-Pakistan TTP sanctuaries in Afghanistan as proof of Kabul's duplicity.

The Moscow Format

As confidence in Washington diminished, Pakistan proactively broadened its diplomatic relations, most notably the Moscow Format, established by Russia in 2016. The discussions convened regional powers including Russia, China, Iran, Pakistan, and subsequently, Central Asian nations to discuss Afghanistan, excluding US (Honson, 2016). This forum was geopolitically beneficial for Pakistan. It positioned Pakistan and neighbouring countries that were similarly apprehensive about US instability and the proliferation of ISIS-Khorasan, and that harboured differing levels of distrust toward the US-supported Afghan government. It also

enabled a strategic rapprochement with Russia, characterized by joint military exercises in 2016 and negotiations about arms sales (*Dawn*, 2016). This regional shift indicated that Pakistan was developing diplomatic alternatives.

Securing the Durand Line

Believing that Kabul was failed to defend its border, the Pakistani military and PML-N government initiated a significant unilateral endeavour about physical fence of the 2,600-kilometer Durand Line. The project entailed the installation of a double-barbed wire fence, surveillance cameras, and a network of new fortifications (Shams, 2017). Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa emphasized the necessity of halting unauthorized movement of terrorists and traffickers that constituted a flagrant act of aggression against Afghanistan (Alamgirian & Riaz, 2019). Kabul had never acknowledged the Durand Line as an international boundary, yet the fence established it as such, physically separating Pashtun tribes and infringing over territory claimed by Afghanistan (Gul, 2017). It became as the definitive emblem of the relationship's decline between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The Trump South Asia Strategy (August 2017)

The conclusive shock for PML-N Government was the announcement of Donald Trump's South Asia Strategy on August 21, 2017. Trump issued a harsh public condemnation of Pakistan and added that the very terrorists we are combating, offering sanctuaries to agents of chaos, violence, and terror, and delivering to the US nothing but falsehoods and duplicity (The White House, 2017). He advocated for a strengthened strategic engagement with India to stabilize Afghanistan (The White House, 2017). This approach halted substantial military assistance that was pivotal moment for PML-N. US was unequivocally siding with India toward Afghanistan and publicly attributing sole responsibility on Pakistan. The PML-N government convened the National Security Committee to refute the false narrative and asserted that Pakistan would never compromise on its national interests (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2017). The approach decisively terminated any residual cooperation fiction with US regarding Afghanistan, propelling Islamabad closer to its regional allies, Russia and China, and solidifying its determination to witness US failure in Afghanistan unless its fundamental concerns were acknowledged. The tense impasse remained in concluding months of the PML-N administration till May 2018.

Conclusion

This study investigated the dynamics of Pak-Afghan relations during PML-N administration (2013–2018) by evaluating the foreign policy objectives and significant events that influenced bilateral ties. The PML-N aimed to enhance relations with Afghanistan while tackling ongoing security issues and fostering regional stability. They prioritized diplomatic discussions, collaboration in counterterrorism, backing for the Afghan-led peace initiative, enhanced border governance, and regional economic integration. A key characteristic was their focus on diplomatic interaction through dialogues with political and military officials. The PML-N got engaged for regional peace and collaboration with global partners as well as Afghan government and the Taliban negotiation.

The research indicates that both countries persistently encountered substantial structural and political obstacles. Afghanistan consistently voiced apprehensions about terrorist havens and transnational insurgent operations, whereas Pakistan highlighted the existence of anti-Pakistan militant factions based in Afghanistan. These assessments generated persistent tensions that hindered diplomatic advancements. Pakistan's initiatives to enhance border security and better management of cross-border transit were the issues as Durand Line issue hindered bilateral collaboration in border determination. The global geopolitical also profoundly impacted Pakistan's foreign policy such as the departure of NATO, alterations in United States regional strategies, India's growing involvement in Afghanistan, and China's rising economic influence via regional connectivity projects, influenced Pakistan's strategic assessments. Despite this, PML-N fostered regional economic collaboration via trade, transit, and connectivity projects. The PML-N approach was a realistic effort to reconcile national security interests and regional collaboration.

In short, the relations between both countries during 2013-2018 showcased notable diplomatic initiatives and persistent strategic obstacles. The PML-N's foreign policy exhibited a dedication to regional tranquility, diplomatic interaction, and economic interlinkage, but these aims were hindered by ongoing security issues, reciprocal skepticism, historical conflicts, and the wider regional geopolitical landscape.

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