

Journal of Indian Studies

Vol. 11, No. 1, January– June, 2025, pp. 21 – 32

Post Withdrawal Fallout: US Exit from Afghanistan and Its Implications for Pakistan-US Relations.

Umbreen

M.Phil Scholar, Department of Political Science and International Relations,
University of Management and Technology, Lahore., Pakistan.

Email: s2025112004@umt.edu.pk

Received:
May 5, 2025

Published:
Jun 30, 2025

ABSTRACT

When the United States pulled out its forces out of Afghanistan in August 2021, it was a historic moment in geopolitics in the region which evidently has influenced the Pakistan-U.S. relations. The paper examines the strategic, security and diplomatic implications of the American withdrawal, and how it realigned the bilateral relations and the regional affiliations. Leveraging on a qualitative research approach, the study would examine secondary sources, such as policy reports, academic documents, and official statements, in the theoretical perspective of Realism. These results imply that the U.S. disengagement has left a power vacuum in Afghanistan, which has produced immediate security consequences in Pakistan, including a strong surge in militant threats of terrorist groups like the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and IS-Khorasan and an unprecedented rise in cross-border tensions. Furthermore, the ensuing influx of Afghan refugees and the spread of U.S. weapons to the militant circles have aggravated Pakistan internal security dilemma. Diplomatically, the withdrawal has increased the trust deficit between the Islamabad and the Washington with both countries readjusting of their strategic priorities. The U.S. has abandoned its targeted power play on the global front, especially in the Indo-Pacific, and Pakistan has become more involved in its regional powers, such as China and Russia, which means they have begun to diversify strategically. It has been concluded that Pakistan-U.S. relations have reached a stage of tentative pragmatism, where alliances politics were partially replaced by transactional interests. The transformation of this bi-lateral posture can well be explained by realism where both the states tend to pursue more regional national interest in a state of anarchic and unpredictable regional order. The study provides ideas of how the future cooperation is likely to occur through shared security and strategy of recalibration.

Key Words: Regional Security, Taliban Resurgence, Post-Withdrawal Fallout, Pak-US Foreign Policy, Global Implications

Introduction

The August 2021 withdrawal of United States from its longest war in Afghanistan opened a new post-US chapter of geopolitical recalibration in South Asia. U.S had invaded Afghanistan in 2001 following the 9/11 attacks and it was under the pretense that it was intending to dismantle al-Qaeda, the Taliban regime and establish a democratic state in Afghanistan. In two decades, the U.S government

spent trillions and dusted thousands of forces to stabilize the nation and combat terrorism. This long-term temptation did not lead to existence of sustainable political and security system in Afghanistan by the U.S. military presence. The resulting Pull-out-rapid, chaotic and lacked any power-sharing agreement, resulted in the collapse of the human dispensation of Afghanistan and the re-emergence of the Taliban. This evolution did not only redefine the internal development of Afghanistan but also caused a strategic and security change in the region, and particularly in the immediate neighbor, Pakistan. It has served as a theater of great-power rivalry, proxy wars and insurgency since decades. Instability in the country has always affected the regional players, especially Pakistan because it shares a porous borderline with Afghanistan, a 2,600-kilometer borderline. Pakistan has traditionally had great entanglement in the Afghanistan affairs, whether on the state level as diplomacy and at the deeper levels as strategic involvement, the relationship between the two countries with the many factions including the Taliban is deep rooted. U.S. withdrawal thus has a lot of implications on the domestic security, regional positioning and bilateral relationship between Pakistan and Washington. The Taliban in power has also reverted to past trends of militancy, cross border terrorism and refugee flows. In addition, the withdrawal has led to speculation on the importance of Pakistan to the U.S war effort, their latent potential strategic importance to the Washington, and the general future of war in the Pakistan-U.S. relations. This paper aims to research and discuss the effects of the U.S. withdrawal on the Pakistan-U.S. relationship in a qualitative way with emphasis on security, diplomacy and other regional realignments. The study seeks to know the impact the withdrawal has had in the behavior of the foreign policy, the dynamics of security within Pakistan and its recalibration strategies towards regional powers such as China and Russia. The research will further attempt to evaluate the changing American attitude towards Pakistan within the confines of larger strategic interests in the Indo- Pacific as well as in the international counter-terrorist system. Using the theory of Realism, the paper understands the decisions and actions of Pakistan and the U.S as logical actions aimed at maintaining national interest in an anarchic international system. The article has the following structure: The following section shows the theoretical framework; in that case, the Realism paradigm is going to be used as a guiding lens. This is then proceeded with a thorough flow of details of the qualitative research approach. The following literature review part covers the current scholarly discussion of U.S. withdrawal and Pakistan-U.S. relations reviewing the literature. Analysis and discussion insight is the most vital part of the paper as it discusses the post withdrawal fall-out in angle of security threats, reconfiguration of diplomacy and future feasible strategies. At last, the conclusion sums up the research and provides the reflection of the possible future trends of Pakistan and the U.S. relationship within the new geopolitical environment.

Literature Review

The U.S. pullout of Afghanistan in August 2021 paved the way to a drastic change in regional relations, which essentially changed the Pakistan-U.S. relations. Researchers stress that the suddenness of the withdrawal created a vacuum in power and caused instability that spilt to the porous western borders of Pakistan. The direct consequences were immediately experienced by Pakistan: there was an increased number of terrorist attacks associated with the empowered Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K). According to the reports, violence reportedly increased more than 50 percent in 2022. Even further, the influx of refugees (estimated by the UNHRC at 600 000 new arrivals) had increased economic and social pressures. According to the analysts, this transition triggered the rebound of insurgent activities and made Islamabad broaden counter-terrorism efforts. Conversely, at the policy level, the fundamental transformation of the foreign strategy course took place where Islamabad initiated transitioning towards a regional focus instead of a U.S.-centered one. This corresponds to the fact that the lack of focus by Washington today is due to the increasing alignment of Pakistan with China, which is best symbolized by the increased participation in CPEC, SCO and the increasing levels of security cooperation with both Beijing and Moscow (Mahmood & Askari, 2025). However, analysts observe Pakistan has not altogether lost its interest in connecting with the U.S. intelligence and share information, and the military strategists also do not want to facilitate the emergence of new terror safe havens in Afghanistan, a reluctance that has also been instrumental in the post turnover trust deficits that have haunted bilateral cooperation efforts. The trust deficits have been based on old claims of Pakistani involvement in supporting Taliban and Osama bin Laden residing on the Pakistani land, now reducing opposition cooperation efforts in the post-withdrawal scenario. Nonetheless, in the middle-level the two countries have descended to continue negotiation particularly by the common interests about control of terrorism despite Islamabad oppressing the prospect of U.S. military bases in the land.

The dynamics of attitudes of Pakistan to the Taliban government is quite complicated: as regional analysts note, Islamabad supports and is afraid of a Taliban-controlled Kabul, in one way or another, at the same time. On the one hand, Islamabad has attempted to push the Taliban to moderate through diplomatic levels and Extended Troika format, and on the other has challenged to face cross-border violence by the TTP. What used to define this balancing act was a cautious adoption of strategic depth calculations, retaining ties to the Taliban to wage the Indian influence once again, and the fear that Islamabad will be pulled into new civil war in Afghanistan. Analysts warn however that Pakistan is getting closer to China and drifting further away to the American strategic concepts which makes Washington less likely to consider Islamabad as a critical partner.

Research Questions

1. How has the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan influenced the strategic and diplomatic contours of Pakistan–U.S. relations in the post-2021 era?
2. What role has the resurgence of militancy and border insecurity played in reshaping Pakistan’s foreign policy priorities and its engagement with the United States?
3. To what extent has the U.S. exit from Afghanistan accelerated Pakistan’s geopolitical realignment toward regional powers like China and Russia, and what are the implications for future Pakistan–U.S. cooperation?

Theoretical Framework

This paper uses Realism and especially Neorealism theoretical perspective to examine the consequences of American departure in Afghanistan on Pak-U.S. relations. Realism argues that international system can be described as anarchic and states participate in international system in pursuit of national interest, mainly concerned with protecting and survival. The graceful U.S. departure in 2021 was a major transformation of power in the region, which created a vacuum that had a direct reflection on strategic considerations of other countries in the region, especially Pakistan. According to a realist view, the withdrawal was a decision made in order to reorganize the resources and strategic priorities of the U.S on having a great-power competition elsewhere, mainly against China. Pakistan, in its turn, encountered the growth of cross-border militancy, influx of refugees on its territory, and the reduction of the influence on the newly empowered Taliban regime, and had to adjust its foreign policy and safeguard its national security interests in a more unstable regional environment.

The new tension and strategic gap in the Pakistan- US relations can be also explained through the prism of realism. The historical transactional character of these bilateral relations, based on the counterterrorism and strategic usefulness has been undermined as mutual trust was destroyed. The United States would never believe the relationship of Pakistan to the Afghan Taliban, and Pakistan is watching the withdrawal process as the sign of American short-term interest in regional stability failure. When there is failure on the part of American involvement there is likelihood, which Realism projects that Pakistan would aspire to find a balance by improving its relationships with other powers such as China and Russia to offset the strategic uncertainty and continuing influence within the region. In this way, situation in the post-withdrawal changes of alliances pattern, threat perception, and foreign policy priorities can be explained by the coherent Realist framework that helps to draw a clear picture of a typical example of states adapting their strategies in an anarchic and highly competitive global environment.

Research Methodology

The research design which would be used in this research is qualitative research design which would be used to present qualitative knowledge on the matter in order to give a detailed picture on the strategic, political and diplomatic implication of the American withdrawal of Afghanistan on the Pakistan- American relations. This is the best way to go about it since international relations and foreign policy behavior is really complex and interpretive. The research will work with the content analysis of the secondary sources of data, such as articles published in academic journals, policy papers, government documents, expert interviews, and reliable media reports. In short, thematic analysis in the study allows determining the major trends and changes in bilateral relations, security issues, and regional alliances after the withdrawal. Through the analysis of narrative, discourse, and policy reactions within the U.S. and Pakistani perspective, the qualitative methodology makes it possible to develop the textured discussion of the state behavior, factors of strategic interest, and the such state in the evolving geopolitical background. Here, the contextual and theory-informed explanation that may be applied to describe the respective reaction of these states to the post-withdrawal power dynamics and regional uncertainty is deemed as Realism.

Analysis and Discussion

Historical Roots

The Pakistan and The US war with Afghanistan Since 2001 Pakistan had a two-fold position in the US-led war in terror. Although it was a principal US ally, on whose logistical support it relied, as well as on its intelligence and support in the war against terror, it was also found to host Taliban and the Haqqani Network members. The US had given Pakistan more than \$33 billion in aid over the years up to 2018 (Congressional Research Service, 2021), but the two always had rocky relationships with the lack of mutual trust. Trust was further undermined in 2011 when Abbottabad operation killed Osama bin laden close to the Pakistan military academy. The US was progressively looking at Pakistan through the prism of its counterterrorism record and Pakistan resented the fact that the US was not giving due credit to the sacrifices that it was making, that it had lost over 80,000 people in action and was suffering losses worth \$150 billion to its economy as far as the Pakistan Foreign Office was concerned.

Post-Withdrawal Fallout: U.S. Exit from Afghanistan and Its Implications for Pakistan–U.S. Relations amid Contemporary Challenges

The withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan, which was completed on August 30, 2021, marked the end of the two-decade military engagement in the

country. This event also allowed the Taliban to take control of the country, culminating in the fall of Kabul on August 15, 2021. In addition to triggering greater instability in the region, the aftermath of the Taliban takeover resulted in the dispersal of around \$7 billion worth of American military equipment. This has been enabling TTP militants in the Pakistani regions of Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Since 2021, Pakistan has experienced an increase in terrorist activities—over 2,500 fatalities in 2024 during a nine-year peak of civilian and security worker deaths. These plunging numbers reflect high-profile cross-border attacks which have become common. The TTP's audacity has increased due to sanctuary across the Durand Line—this was shown in the December 28, 2025 Mir Ali bombing that killed 16 soldiers and in April 2025 North Waziristan clashes where 71 militants were killed. In December 2024, Pakistan conducted airstrikes aimed at TTP positions in the Afghan provinces of Paktika and Khost, which resulted in diplomatic tensions and strikes by the Afghan Taliban viewed as violations of sovereignty. Islamabad viewed support of the Afghan Taliban as a means to control regional militants, but this tactic has been ignored by the Afghan proxy's largely unresponsive posture toward TTP aggression, fracturing Pakistan's strategic gamble. These events have further strained U.S.-Pakistan relations:

Pakistan's Strategic Dilemma and Regional Security

This would be felt as a tectonic paradigm shift in the security structure of South Asia as in August 2021, the United States decided abruptly to withdraw its forces in Afghanistan. Pakistan had been a major point of transition and one that facilitated, given the influence that it had over the Taliban fractions. The departure of the U.S. troops in Afghanistan put Pakistan in a complicated geopolitical mathematics: the rise of the Taliban to power in Kabul put Islamabad in a more immediate strategic position to a neighbor state now having U.S. weapons at its disposal including an estimated military hardware worth of \$7 billion including the equipment left behind. The sources of the problem increasing the challenges of internal security in Pakistan are the U.S. weapons accorded to the Afghan forces initially, which have currently reached the hands of National and provincial Taliban and other militant organizations in Pakistan. Meanwhile, more than 1.4 million Afghan refugees stayed in Pakistan under the umbrella of UNHCR, which put a burden on the resource constraints of the provinces, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan. At the same time, boundary skirmishes were taking place: late December 2024, examples of the footprints of cross-border breakdown consisted of violent in-lawlessness crossings by militants and Pakistani Air Force retaliation incursions into Afghanistan. It is as a result of such dynamics that the security establishment in Islamabad has realigned its own strategy by weighing its historical ties with the Taliban against its own interest of maintaining internal stability and fighting against terror.

Realignment of the U.S Pakistan Military Cooperation

Pakistan military relations with the U.S. have had some ups and downs in the past since the Cold War and War on terror in the 1980s as compared to the aid suspension that has taken place in the 2010s. U.S. military assistance was ended since 2017 (USD 2 billion/year previously), but in 2022 a small degree of resumption occurred in the form of the Exercise Falcon Talon, the first USAF/PAF joint military exercise since 2019. At the same time, Pakistan has been improving its defense relationship with China, acquiring more and more sophisticated fighting machines. The latest visit by the Army Chief of Pakistan, General Asim Munir, in Washington featured talks on collaboration against the anti-ISIS stuff, whereas Moscow held onto Beijing offers on J-35 stealth fighters and sophisticated air defenses. This mixed stance emphasizes the interest of Islamabad to maintain credible ties with the United States in spite of hedging against China. To make this process even more complicated, America has been debating whether to grant or delete the Major Non-NATO Ally (MNNA) status to Pakistan. Analysts suggest that MNNA ought to come with the condition of counter-terrorism performance and economic reforms indicating requirements that Islamabad lift its military cooperation out of legacy with the United States into performance-based give and take.

Aid and Economic Leverage Realignment

Due to the U.S exit in Afghanistan, there was the reevaluation of the economic influence that Washington had in Pakistan. American civilian assistance to Pakistan evaporated instead - \$300 million or so annual outlay in 2022 to practically nothing by 2025. In 2018, the military aid ended, and funding resources were abruptly cut, so Islamabad has turned to China and the international capital markets, and was also to turn to the IMF. The servicing of debt in Pakistan used more than 80 percent of federal earnings during FY 2023; inflation was once high as nearly 30 percent but just lately has settled around 5 percent. There is a change in the dynamics of trade as well. In mid-2025, Pakistani trade officials were said to have been negotiating in Washington to avert the possible 29 % American tariff on its 3-billion-dollar surplus. In exchange with U.S. firms, Islamabad has offered to make concessions in the mining of minerals in the province of Baluchistan, including joint ventures at Reko Diq, and inviting tariff adjustability in the next budget in order to receive tariff relief. These measures represent the increasing tendency of Pakistan to employ economic involvement, as a counter measure to its bilateral relationship, instead of focusing on military cooperation only.

The Realignment of Aid and the Economic Leverage

The American departure in Afghanistan led to review of the economic influence of Washington over Pakistan. Pakistan civilian aid by the U.S. deteriorated to about

2022 of \$300 million and reduced to minimum aid by the year 2025. In 2018, military aid was terminated, and economic aid was dropped by 20 per cent; consequently, Islamabad has turned to China and other capital markets as well as the IMF. The debt servicing of Pakistan accounted over 80 percent of the federal revenue in FY 2023; the inflation rate stood at close to 30 percent which later relaxed to around 5 percent in more recent times. There has also been a change in the dynamics of trade. In mid-2025, Pakistani trade officials were reported in Washington discussing the measures to avert a possible 29 per cent U.S. tariff on its three billion U.S. dollar surplus. Islamabad offered concessions to American companies in the mining sector of Baluchistan including joint ventures at Reko Diq and adjustability in tariffs in the forthcoming budget in exchange of tariff relaxation. Such undertakings are in keeping with the increased Pakistani economy interest approach, as opposed to an entirely military collaboration, to balance its bilateral relationship.

Counter -Terrorism and Ideational Realignment

After the withdrawal, a new chapter in the U.S. and Pakistan counter-terrorism agenda had been opened. Islamabad helped evacuate the Afghans during the 2021 evacuation, but it is still under pressure by the U.S. to resolve to take decisive measures against terror forces originating out of Afghanistan. According to Pakistan, it poses limited leverage over the Taliban, and the rebuilding of relations is possible only when Islamabad does more, particularly when it intersects with geo-economic policy interests. In the meantime, Islamabad is experiencing its fair share of escalating violence by the Pakistani Taliban forces which have been emboldened by the spreading of spillover arms. On such a realization that U.S. Pakistani synergy is still fundamental to regional stability, Islamabad has continued to play pick-and-choose collaboration in the military, e.g., in the arrest and delivery to the U.S. and ISIS-K suspect wanted in the Kabul Airport bombing, which is roundly applauded publicly by President Trump as he visited Washington in July with the now retired Gen. Munir.

The Strategic Competition: The United States, China, India and Multilateral Aspects

Regional balances changed with the withdrawal of the U.S. U.S: The U.S has enhanced its strategic relations with India who could be its critical ally in curbing terrorism and balancing China and on the other hand Pakistan is determined to sustain relations with two power at a time. It has been observed that Islamabad is increasingly depending on China in matters relating to defense (more than 70 % arms originating countries). May 2025 was the month of geopolitical changes, which were characterized by four days of India-Pakistan war, indicating how security in the region was on a thin scale. The mediation efforts were considered to be part of the U.S. diplomatic choreography that showed the other interest of the

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United States in the South Asian stability. After these confrontations, Pakistan and India went into a cold ceasefire, and the American pundits believed that MNNA amendments and economic offers must be allied with Islamabad security conduct. In Washington, Pakistan presented a series of diplomatic initiatives: the opportunities to explore vital metal resources in Baluchistan; demonstrating the cooperation possibilities in the framework of the Chinese and Pakistani Economic Corridor in the context of expanding to the region; and aiming at the greater alignment with the U.S. corporations regarding the mining and cryptocurrency regulations.

Aid, Trade and Transnational Accountability Navigation

As American support was reduced and levels of confidence reduced--Pakistan only received \$8.6 billion of much promised military and economic aid (18 billion dollars) between 2002 and 11--Washington has been restructuring relations toward accountability and structural reform. Misuse of funds has been a chronic concern as earlier as 70 percent of allocated funds--as held in 2002 to 2007. Congressional transparency and mistrust have hardened against Pakistan These voices call upon Pakistan and the U.S. to cease their zero-sum.

Post-Withdrawal Fallout: The Implication of the U.S. withdrawal to Afghanistan on Pakistan-U.S. relationship and the Way Forward

This withdrawal of the U.S. forces in Afghanistan, what occurred in August 2021 has brought a different twist to the region geopolitics especially on the relationship between the U.S. and Pakistan. The abrupt failure of the Afghan government and the abrupt dominance of the Taliban that followed left the world concerned of the imminent threats of instability in the region, revival of terrorism, influx of refugees, and economic spill-overs. In the case of Pakistan, a country that borders Afghanistan by a long and porous border, post-withdrawal years have been characterized by security-related issues as a result of the rise of cross-border militancy and the re-origin of the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The U.S., in its turn, changed its strategic priorities shifting them to the great power competition and minimizing direct involvement in South Asia. Such recalibration put a strain on bilateral relations as the Washington side showed doubts that Pakistan truly supported the Taliban and the Islamabad side accused the west of its hasty departure and inability to stabilize Afghanistan. On a financial note, Pakistan has suffered most of the Afghan unrest including refugee burden and economic jams. On the political front, it has found it hard to juggle between its relationships with the Regime of Taliban and Western powers. In the future, it is crucial to have an adjusted relationship based on mutual interests. Future engagement must be based on cooperation in countering terrorism, regional connectivity, humanitarian support, creating development. The U.S. must have a subtle policy where it considers the security interest of Pakistan and gains its support towards its own

stability in Afghanistan and on the other hand Pakistan needs to make sure its territory gets not utilized by extremist forces that present security risk to the region. A dialogue and stability can be fostered through multilateral platforms like the UN, OIC, and SCO among others. The only long-term feasible course both countries can follow to ensure that the spill-over effects of Afghanistan never degenerate into a strategic big-loss is constructive diplomacy and trust-building as well as policy synchronization. The phase has given a possibility to Pakistan and the U.S. to reestablish their relations within the context of the emerging realities in the region.

Conclusively: The Post-Withdrawal Fall Out and its Implicative to the Pakistan-US relations

The withdrawal of the U.S. forces in Afghanistan in August 2021 became a drastic geopolitical twist that profoundly affected the region and specifically transformed the boundaries of Pakistan-US relations. Once both were strategic allies in the cold war and War on Terror, are taking up the phase of rebalancing their bilateral relationship with new-fangled security issues being misgiving, a lack of trust, and the changing strategic ambitions. The withdrawal has resulted in unstable vacuum in Afghanistan that has enabled reoccurrence of extremist groups like TTP and IS-K, which continuously disrupt the internal security of Pakistan. This has enhanced the strategic panic of Islamabad and rekindled its reliance on property workouts of local counterterrorism. At the same time, the fall of the US-supported Afghanistan government and the establishment of the Taliban government have put Pakistan in a diplomatic pickle especially with the US, on one hand supporting an orderly situation in Afghanistan, and on the other pleasing the US. The U.S. disappointed with the result of its 20-year-long involvement is outspoken about the supposed dual policy of Pakistan regarding the war in Afghanistan, which created a certain cooling of the diplomatic relations and decreased the security cooperation. On the economic front, Pakistan, thus far, has largely been disappointed that its hopes of renewed aid flow or trade benefits in a post-withdrawal situation were thwarted by the shift in the US regional interests to contain China, including its Indo-Pacific policy and an increased relationship to India. This shift of strategy puts Pakistan even further out of focus as the main priorities of the U.S. foreign policy. Nevertheless, in spite of those problems, Pakistan-US relations with the US are not quite hostile. The options on the table still have a chance to be pragmatic with the issues such as counterterrorism, stability in the region, help in the form of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, climate resilience and technological contingency. The role that Pakistan plays as a nuclear country and its geo strategic position makes it an irreplaceable stakeholder in the stability of the south Asian region. Bilateral relations will most likely be founded on the mutual understanding of the changing national interests but not the aspects of common ideology or reliance on security. To restore confidence the two countries, have to look beyond transactional relations to a long-term multi-dimensional approach through

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economic collaboration, interpersonal relations and institutional talks. To sum up, the withdrawal of the U.S. forces in Afghanistan has demonstrated the weakness and timidity of the Pakistan-U.S. alliance, not to mention a chance to reshape it. The two countries may or may not succeed to convert the security-based interaction to a more comprehensive strategy-based relationship, depending on whether the two nations are capable of curbing the historical differences, recognizing the new realities in the global system, and following a balanced, prospective agenda that relates to mutual respect and common interests. The Afghanistan withdrawal has reshaped dynamics within the region, exposing U.S.-Pakistan relations to renewed strategic recalibrations and trust deficits. All other states involved now face intensified security, economic, and diplomatic constraints alongside a power vacuum amid growing regional volatility.

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