

# UNDERSTANDING AFGHANISTAN-PAKISTAN RELATIONS IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD\*

*Çok Kutuplu Bir Dünyada Afganistan-Pakistan İlişkilerini Anlamak*

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## Abstract

*Afghanistan and Pakistan have been maintaining an unstable neighborly relationship for seventy-five years in a geography that has historically been the field of great power rivalry. The process, which started with the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in August 2021, took place during a period when the international system has been undergoing transformation for more than a decade. In this regard, the aim of the study is to try to understand dynamics of Afghanistan-Pakistan relations in the context of emerging multipolar international environment. The study mainly explores how the relations between the two countries might be affected by the emerging international environment and the interests and policies of other countries in the region.*

**Keywords:** *Afghanistan-Pakistan Relations, Taliban, Bilateral Relations, Multipolarity, International System.*

## Öz

*Afganistan ve Pakistan tarihsel süreçte sürekli büyük güçlerin rekabet alanı olmuş bir coğrafyada yetmiş beş yıldır istikrarsız bir komşuluk ilişkisi sürdürmektedir. Ağustos 2021'de Taliban'ın Afganistan'da tekrar yönetimi ele geçirmesiyle başlayan süreç, uluslararası sistemin de bir süredir değişim geçirdiği dönemde gerçekleşmiştir. Bu kapsamda çalışmanın amacı Afganistan-Pakistan ilişkilerinin dinamiklerini ortaya çıkarmakta olan çok kutuplu ortam çerçevesinde anlamaya çalışmaktır. Çalışma temel olarak iki ülke arasındaki ilişkilerin ortaya çıkan uluslararası ortamdan ve bölgedeki diğer ülkelerin çıkar ve politikalarından nasıl etkilenebileceğini araştırmaktadır.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Afganistan-Pakistan İlişkileri, Taliban, İkili İlişkiler, Çok Kutupluluk, Uluslararası Sistem.*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The relations between two states are affected by multiple factors. History, culture, geogapyh, demography, trade, economy, political systems, identity and ideology play important roles. These are some of the factors that determine interest of the states. As the interests of the countries converge, they develop friendly relations. On the other hand, diverging or conflicting interests may cause unfriendly or hostile relations. As it is the case for human beings bilaleral realtions of two states are also affected by the other states. When the interests of multiple states are involved in the game it becomes a multi-variable problem. Depending on weight of variable, interests of the other state or states may become dominant factor in the relations of two states.

Afghanistan and Pakistan are two countries that have a 75-year-old neighborly relationship on a geography that has witnessed great power rivalry in 19th century, called the "Great Game". After the inter-imperial contestation of the 19th century, this challenging geography became one of the battlegrounds of two great powers, USA and Soviet Union, in the second half of the 20th century. After it was over just twenty years passed when the same territory became the stage of "war on terror" this time, which was fought by the US and its coalition forces.

In this sense, it can be claimed that Afghanistan-Pakistan relations have been shaped by the geography they are located in and the great power competition over it. Chronic problems such as the Durand line, ethnic nationalism and the refugee problem can be seen as traces of this historical geopolitical struggle.

Agfghanistan-Pakistan relations entered a new period after the USA's withdrawal from the region. The policies to be followed by the Taliban, who came back to power after the USA left Afghanistan, are being closely monitored by the international community. On the other hand, a new

# UNDERSTANDING AFGHANISTAN-PAKISTAN RELATIONS IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

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multipolar international system has been emerging accompanied with challenges such as the Ukraine war, Taiwan crisis and post-Covid 19 social and economic troubles.

In this regard, the aim of the study is to analyze the dynamics of Afghanistan-Pakistan relations in the context of emerging multi-polar international environment. The study, mainly investigates how the relations between the two countries will be affected by the reshaping international environment and the interests and policies of other countries in the region.

The study is divided into three sections. Following the introduction, in the first section a short historical overview of the relation has been depicted. In the second section, enduring factors that shapes the relations have been described. Third section explores interests of regional and global actors in the region and their possible effects on the bilateral relations of the two countries. In the conclusion section outcomes of the study has been discussed. The study has identified that relative pause in the great power rivalry in the region provides opportunity to focus on bilateral relations in order to solve persisting problems, enhance cooperation and mutually benefit from favorable conditions.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Brief review of Afghanistan-Pakistan relations' relatively short history reveals that it has been affected by many internal, international and historical factors. The feature of the relations could be described as unstable and fragile. There have been periods of d'etente like 1963–73 and 1996–2001; nonetheless dominant nature of the relations has been hostile even though it has not always ended up in armed conflict (Klan, 2010: 183). In this section, prevailing problems which emanate from bilateral relations will be described in a historical context.

## ULUSLARARASI KRİZ VE SİYASET ARAŞTIRMALARI DERGİSİ

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Current border between Pakistan and Afghanistan was formed in 1893 after an agreement was signed between the British Indian Foreign Secretary Sir Mortimer Durand and Amir Abdurrahman Khan of Afghanistan. The agreement also created a narrow land strip known as Wakhan Corridor which disconnected Russia and British India territories. The “Durand Line” which was “unilaterally determined” by a British Commission, led by Sir Edward Durand, did not follow social and ethnic lines instead dissected Pashtun tribes providing ground for numerous border disputes (Saikal, 2010: 7).

First instance of uneasiness between two neighbors was displayed when Afghanistan came forward as the only state voting against membership of Pakistan in United Nations in September 1947 (UN, 1947). It had to pull pack its veto in October of the same year upon intensive diplomatic pressure and had officially recognized the country (Burget, 2013: 64). The incident portended that Pakistan would inherit the problems from colonial time. Afghan politicians did not hesitate to use tension between two states to gain public favor. Likewise, strained relations between two states was one of the factors that helped Davud Khan to rise power in 1953 and remained to be determining character of the relations in the following ten years (Shakir, 2020: 125).

During the Cold War period the relations between two states followed an unstable pattern which was result of various domestic and international factors. Power struggle between two blocs had undeniable effects on the bilateral relations. While Pakistan opted for the capitalist bloc, Afghanistan remained under Soviet influence. Pakistan had already agreed to take part in the USA’s containment strategy when it participated in South East Asia

## UNDERSTANDING AFGHANISTAN-PAKISTAN RELATIONS IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

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Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1954 and Baghdat Pact<sup>1</sup> (CENTO) in 1955. Nevertheless, although Pakistan generally maintained close relations with the western bloc, after Z. Ali Bhutto raised to power in 1973 it leaned towards Soviets for a brief period (Özev, 2012: 155). The rationale behind the change from Western oriented policy to more balanced approach with Soviet Union and China was the lack of sufficient support from the West during 1965 and 1971 wars with India (Siddiqi, 2008: 19).

From time to time, as in 1963, the two countries developed good relations between them, and this continued during critical periods in 1965 and 1971, and until Davut Khan came to power in a coup in 1973. He was one of the most ardent supporters of Pashtunistan case (Shakir, 2020: 118-119). Thereby, Pashtunistan was one of the causes he used to justify the coup. He also accused the King on the grounds that he did not take advantage of Pakistan's relative weakness during the troubled years that resulted with creation of Bangladesh (Shakir, 2020: 17). Nonetheless, he eased his approach on the issue to allow the bilateral relations to ameliorate between 1975 and 1978 (Shakir, 2020, 62-63).

Invasion of Afghanistan was USSR's counter move against the USA's containment strategy. Subsequent mujahideen resistance was organized and supported by the USA, Pakistan and other Muslim states such as Suudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia had been using sweeping oil revenues to propagate Salafist ideology since 1970s (Pant, 2010: 142). General Zia ul-Haq, known as an Islamist in Pakistan, came to power in a military coup in 1977. He maintained providing support to Mujahaddedin throughout the Soviet invasion. Mainly there were seven groups which received bulk of the foreign aid. Among them, Jamiat-e Islami, led by Burhanuddin Rabbani

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<sup>1</sup> The Pact was renamed as the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) in 1958 after Iraq withdrew from the organization following a coup in the Country.

## ULUSLARARASI KRİZ VE SİYASET ARAŞTIRMALARI DERGİSİ

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and Ahmad Shah Massoud, and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-e Islami were the biggest ones. Hezb-e Islami had close relation with Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) organization (Institute for the Study of the War, 2022).

USSR had to relinquish its war in Afghanistan in 1989 leaving behind Necibullah as head of the state. Soviet backed socialist government of Necibullah couldn't resist pressure from local militia group leaders such as Ahmad Shah Mesut, General Dostum and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar too long and collapsed soon in 1992. Nonetheless rival mujaheden groups couldn't agree on power sharing to fill in the power vacuum. Subsequently country fell into years long internal armed conflict (Shakir, 2020: 72).

The madrasas in Pakistan had taught students from Afhan refugee camps since Soviet occupation expelled them from their country. These places had become radicalization centers for youth who sought shelter and better living conditions. They fought against Soviets during the invasion in order to save the homeland and Islam. After the civil war broke out among several Islamist factions, these students launched a struggle to eliminate the turmoil and restore stability. Thus, the Taliban emerged in Kandahar with the promise of order and security during the chaotic, post-occupation civil war period. The Taliban took control of Kandahar in 1994, pushing forward, taking over the country city by city, and eventually dominated the capital in 1996 and most of the rest of the country in the 2000s (Shakir, 2020: 74-76). ISI had supported creation of the Taliban movement whose aim was to establish an Islamic state ruled by sharia law and maintained backing it since then (Gross, 2014).

Pakistan was among few countries which recognized the Taliban regime. Others were Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Those countries sustained their support for the Taliban in its war against opposition groups mainly against the Northern Alliance which was backed

## UNDERSTANDING AFGHANISTAN-PAKISTAN RELATIONS IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

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by India, Russia, Iran and Central Asia States except Turkmenistan. Following 11 September 2001 attacks the USA declared “War on Terror” and launched campaign in Afghanistan. Taliban regime was toppled by the USA forces and the Northern Alliance fighters. Most of the Taliban elements were pushed out of country across Pakistan border where they found new hideouts (Institute for the Study of the War, 2022).

The circumstances rolled out a situation in which Pakistan found out itself in a dilemma. An ally was forced out from power by an old ally who could tilt the balance in the region. Especially, fear of India’s gaining advantage from the situation urged Pakistan to come up with a strategy. President of Pakistan Pervez Musharraf declared that Pakistan would support the the USA’s “war on terror” and intimated his support for Karzai administration (Saikal, 2018: 10).

Pakistan allowed coalition troops to use its territory for logistics and operational purposes. Nevertheless, it continued to harbor Taliban militants as well (Gross, 2014). Consequently Taliban regained operational capability in 2004 (Shakir, 2020: 41). The dilemma urged Pakistan to play “double game”, which became clear when it was discovered that Osama Bin Laden had been hiding in a house close to the military academy in Abbottabad (Chalmers, 2011). Although duality compromised reliability as a partner in “war on terror” Pakistan was not willing to finish up its strategic tool for good. It continued to maintain leverage over Taliban leadership while fighting against Pakistan Taliban and other radical terrorist organizations in the country.

Nevertheless, it wouldn’t be easy to manage the duality. Aghanistan leadership didn’t hesitate to publicise Pakistan’s support to Taliban militants as the insurgency regained strength in its territory. For instance, in 2006 Afghanistan President Karzai disclosed names of some of the

## ULUSLARARASI KRİZ VE SİYASET ARAŞTIRMALARI DERGİSİ

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Taliban leaders residing in Pakistan. Allegation was strictly denied by Pakistan (Siddiqi, 2018: 35). Ascending to power in 2014 after Karzai, Ashraf Ghani in the first year of his tenure tried to improve relations with Pakistan vis a vis India but in the remaining years he pursued more balanced approach (Constantino, 2020: 7).

The USA and coalition forces had stopped their combat mission and transitioned security responsibility to Afghan authorities in 2014. On 1 January 2015, after completion ISAF mission NATO launched a new non-combat mission under the name of Resolute Support (NATO, 2022).

The USA continued to execute counter terrorism mission separately. 2016 was a turning point for the USA and its allies in their Afghanistan policy. Trump administration put into place policy of bringing back all American overseas soldiers into the USA soils. In line with this his government started negotiation with Taliban in Doha, Qatar in October 2018 (Al Jazeera, 2018). Pakistan played a significant role in bringing the Taliban to negotiation table, which indicated that the relationship between South Asia's two troubled neighbors was beginning to evolve towards cooperation. This situation was reinforced by the mutual visits of Afghanistan's chief negotiator Abdullah Abdullah and Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan in autumn 2020 (Faiez, 2020).

Trump's Afghanistan policy resulted with catastrophic withdrawal of the USA and coalition forces in August 2021. Taliban took the whole country under control without facing any resistance from the USA/NATO built ANSF. Afghanistan president fled the country on 15 August 2021 marking the end of an era and opening another (Ward et al, 2021). It was also a new beginning for Afghanistan-Pakistan relations.



## UNDERSTANDING AFGHANISTAN-PAKISTAN RELATIONS IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

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### ENDURING PROBLEMS IN BILATERAL RELATIONS

Afghanistan and Pakistan are neighbors on a 2,640-kilometer border. While living on a geography demarcated by a line that passes through unnatural boundaries, two nations are connected with social, political, economical, demographical and cultural bonds. Some of these bonds sit on dividing lines that creates controversy and uneasiness, some of them compel two countries to act together. Consequently, natural interconnectivity between two neighbors is one of the main determinants of course of their relationship.

Sharing a lengthy border urges Afghanistan and Pakistan to become indispensable trade partners. In 2020 Afghanistan exported % 27.9 of its products to Pakistan which makes it third export market, and imported % 12.6 products from Pakistan which makes it second import market. On the other hand Pakistan exported %3.41 of its products to Afghanistan, making it third export partner; imported 0.97% products making it 15th import partner (OEC World, 2022).

Pakistan has advantage of having access to sea line of communication. Since Afghanistan is landlocked country it is dependent on Pakistan and Iran to reach out to maritime trade. Therefore, Pakistan obtains economical benefits and has leverage on Afghan economy (OEC World, 2022). Pakistan's export to Afghanistan is 2-3 times more than Afghanistan's export to Pakistan.

Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1979 triggered one of the biggest mass movements of population in twentieth century. Around 7 million people moved to neighboring countries. The number of people who sought refuge in Pakistan reached 3.3 million in 1990. While most of the refugees arriving in Iran was Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras, most of

refugees destined for Pakistan was Pashtuns (Yesevi, 2019: 10-11). This has created one of the biggest demographic challenges for Pakistan since its inception. Thenceforth, Afghan refugees has been at the center of social-political agenda of Pakistan. It still hosts approximately 1.4 million refugees (UNHCR, 2023). Therefore demographic imbalance created by refugees still poses risk of instability for Pakistan.

### ***DURAND LINE AND PASHTUN ISSUE***

The Durand Line was result of Great Britain's political design in order to shield British India from Russia's expansionist ambitions towards India and Arabian Sea. The line did not follow geographical or natural features as well as ethnic, cultural and linguistic attributes; instead left Pashtun tribes divided on either side of the border line. Thus, securing the border has been a big challenge for both countries.

Especially Pakistan deemed it crucial for its stability. Because, separatist movement in south west Baluchistan region and Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) militants in north west would easily cross over the Afghan side to receive all kinds of supply in Afghanistan. Pakistan launched construction of fences throughout the border in 2019, which has caused tension between the sides thenceforth (Goldbaum-Padshah, 2022). Because Afghanistan doesn't accept the legality of the border, it had objected to closing off the border and claimed that the fences wouldn't prevent terrorist crossings (Pant, 2010: 140).

Even though The Durand Line was first introduced in 1893 it was recognized as permanent border in 1919 by signature of The Treaty of Rawalpindi. It was confirmed again in an agreement signed on 22 November 1921 in Kabul between Great Britain and Afghanistan (Qassem, 2007: 67). The problematic side of the Durand line agreements is that they had been signed before Pakistan was established. Consecutive Afghan governments denounced legitimacy of the line as an international border

## UNDERSTANDING AFGHANISTAN-PAKISTAN RELATIONS IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

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between two sovereign states. Afghan side claims that all agreements signed before disintegration of the British India were not valid and needs to be renegotiated (Qassem, 2007: 69-70). Afghans bases their claim on the ground that there was not such a state as Pakistan when the agreements were signed (Shakir, 2020: 12). On the other hand, Pakistani side who regards herself as inheritor state of British India unequivocally recognizes the Durand Line as legitimate international border since it came into existence in 1893.

Pashtun issue has been another dominant factor that has negative effect on the relations between two states, due to Afghan claim that Pashtun regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan has been part of Afghanistan forming a single Pashtun nation (Qassem, 2007: 71-72). Historically, Pashtuns couldn't form a single a united nation in the region other than the Ahmad Shah Abdali's (also known as Ahmad Shah Abdali) rule between 1747 and 1772 (Qassem, 2007: 71-72). He was able to establish an empire stretching from Persia to Delhi which also provides the basis for the advocates of Pashtunistan (Gupta, 2019: 96-97).

Demography as well as historical claims play important role on the subject. While Pashtuns in Afghanistan form %48 of the population, they make up %15 percent of population in Pakistan (The World Factbook, 2022). The issue has come to the fore from time to time and strained the relations between two countries, even brought them on the verge of the war as happened more than once in the 1950s and 1960s (Shahab-Bhatnagar, 2007).

After partition of British India consecutive Afghan goventments supported the idea of Pashtunistan. The issue played an important role in forming national identity of Afghanistan. Up until mid 19th century the Bristish empire was "the other" against which Afgan nation identified itself. After foundation of Pakistan at the east of Afghanistan it became new "other" for the Afghans. Unlike British empire, reflection of Pakistan

as “the other” couldn’t be built up on difference of religion or imperialistic ambitions. Therefore, Pashtunistan and border issue was raised up as a new base to construct “the other” on (Shakir, 2020: 49). Pakistan opposed the idea of Pashtunistan on the basis that Pakistani Pashtuns had opportunity to choose either to join India or Pakistan in a referendum (tribal Jirga) that took place in Peshawar in November and December of 1947 in which they opted for Pakistan (Gupta, 2019: 115).

From time to time Pashtunistan issue has been used to ease the tension between two states. For instance, Davut Han, by adopting a softer stance on the issue, enabled the improvement of bilateral relations. The amelioration in relations was reinforced by the mutual visits of the prime ministers and heads of state of the two countries in 1975-1978. This period ended when Davut Khan was ousted from power and killed by a Marxist coup d’etat (Shakir, 2020: 62-63). After the end of the Davud Khan period, the Pashtunistan issue started to lose its weight in bilateral relations and was replaced by newly emerging problems (Shakir, 2020: 126). Subsequently, surging Islamic radicalism after Soviet invasion in 1979 pushed back Pashtun nationalism (Qassem, 2018: 72).

### **PAKISTAN’S STRATEGIC DEPTH POLICY**

Afghanistan is beyond a neighbor for Pakistan. Existential threat perceived from India puts Afghanistan into foremost place in Pakistan’s security considerations. Particularly, secession and succeeding independence of Bangladesh with assistance from India in 1971 created “insecurity syndrome” in the minds of Pakistani leadership and induced them to search for “strategic depth” elsewhere (Shafqat-Ul Haque, 2011: 2).

Gradual Islamization in internal and external politics and subsequent coup d’etat by the end of 1970’s could also be considered as Pakistani state reflex against growing Indian threat. In this regard, the concept of strategic depth connotes both military and political aspects. From

## UNDERSTANDING AFGHANISTAN-PAKISTAN RELATIONS IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

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military perspective; strategic depth policy aims to open up a geographical space in Afghanistan for the defense of the Pakistani army, in order to absorb an Indian attack (Kumar, 2008: 224). Politically, it aims to have a friendly pro-Pakistani government in Afghanistan that will help to curb Indian influence in the region (Siddiqi, 2018: 24). Consequently, in case of a war with India, Pakistan would be able to secure its back and lean on westward.

Pakistan's strategic depth policy has been congruent with Pashtun policy. Pakistan authorities have supported Islamic ideology as a hedge against Pashtun nationalism. A friendly government in Afghanistan would allow Pakistan to enhance its economic and political relations with Central Asia region as well (Siddiqi, 2018: 41-42).

In this sense, by having an Islamist government in Afghanistan, Pakistan obtains multiple benefits; keeps Pashtun nationalism under control, restricts Indian influence in the region, establishes friendly ties with Central Asian republics and obtains external support for Kashmir case.

The policy of strategic depth was not without cost to Pakistan. Islamic radicalization in the region may have contributed to the emergence of the Pakistani Taliban, known as the TTP. It has been seeking to establish a state ruled by strict Islamic rules. TTP carried out numerous terrorist attacks in Pakistan since its founding in 2007 (Ahmed, 2023). According to International Crisis Group (ICG) report they had close ties with Taliban and other militant groups in Afghanistan. They also used safe havens in Afghanistan to conduct attacks in Pakistan territory, specifically in FATA/Khyber Pakhtunkhwa<sup>2</sup> region (ICG, 2014). Pakistan army launched a large-scale campaign to rout out terrorist elements in its territory in 2014.

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<sup>2</sup> Semi-autonomous region of Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) has been put under administrative authority of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in 2018.

Nevertheless, TTP militants have maintained their presence in hideouts in Afghanistan. The group has increased attacks in Pakistan in recent months. Pakistan's retaliation by conducting cross border attacks into Afghanistan territory escalates tension between two countries (Goldbaum-Padshah, 2022).

There are certain internal factors that laid the ground for Pakistan Taliban to flourish. Lack of education, poverty, insufficient infrastructure, influence of madrassas, power of tribes and tribal social codes could be enumerated as some of these factors. Additionally, Pakistan's support to Western forces' fight against Taliban regime might have affected the public disposition towards TTP (Gupta, 2019: 113). Nevertheless its connection with geopolitics of the region shouldn't be overlooked as well. That is to say, if having a leverage in Afghan politics is in Pakistan's interest it wouldn't be surprising to see India's indirect/covert support behind Pakistani Taliban.

Likewise, separatist movement in Baluchistan receives support from external powers through Afghanistan (Pant, 2010: 140). Support to these movements could be considered as India's counter act to offset Pakistan's strategic depth policy.

## EFFECTS OF GLOBAL AND REGIONAL ACTORS ON THE RELATIONS

### *IRAN*

Iran share more than a 900km. border with both countries (921km. with Afghanistan and 909 km. with Pakistan). Hence, securing this long border against illegal drug, arms smuggling and illegal immigration is important for all of the three countries. The countries have deep historical, cultural,

## UNDERSTANDING AFGHANISTAN-PAKISTAN RELATIONS IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

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religious ties. Some ethnic and religious groups such as Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks and Baluchs in Afghanistan have close affinity with Iranian population. Persian language is widely used in Pakistan and especially in Afghanistan.<sup>3</sup>

Another commonality is place of Islam in the socio-political system of the three countries. Iran is a Shia dominated country, on the other hand majority of Afghans and Pakistanis are Sunni and both countries also have Shia minorities. Islamic rules are ingrained in Iran's and Afghanistan's political system, and Islam extensively influences political system of Pakistan. Nevertheless, although global Islam brotherhood plays a significant role in people's feelings and attitudes, recent political developments in the Middle East have demonstrated that sectarian differences also have important place in foreign policy orientation of the countries. As such, during internal conflict period in 1990s, Iran supported groups opposite to Taliban which it has sectarian and ethnic affinity. Nonetheless, after relation with USA had started worsening, Iran established ties with the Taliban around 2005 and even provided weapon supplies to the Taliban by 2009 (Bokhari, 2022).

USA's extended presence in Afghanistan and establishment of pro-western administration was against Iran's interests. On the other hand, if the USA project had succeeded a powerful and stable government would have served its security by enhancing border control. Therefore, instead of having a radical Sunni government reestablished at its doorstep Iran would have preferred a moderate government with Shia elements in it. In this context, Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan might have caused concern among Iranian rulers. Iran may reconsider its relations with Afghanistan and Pakistan, given the Taliban's close ties with Pakistan and some Gulf States, and Saudi Arabian support for Pakistan. Furthermore, this situation could also induce Iran to improve its relations with India.

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<sup>3</sup> Pakistan's national anthem is written in Persia.

## **RUSSIA**

Russia had pulled out of Afghanistan in 1989 leaving behind a political turmoil. After a short while following break up of Soviet Union, political landscape changed considerably and Central Asian states and Tajikistan emerged as buffer states between Afghanistan and Russia. Since then, Russia doesn't perceive direct threat from Afghanistan. On the other hand, Russia has substantial amount of Islamic population. It wouldn't want Islamic radical groups and terrorist organizations gained ground in proximity of its territory.

With similar security considerations, besides providing support to Northern Alliance who was raging fight against Taliban, Russia had initially also supported the USA's "war against terror". However, the USA's lengthened presence in the region was against Russia's interests. Hence, it tried to facilitate Afghan peace process by hosting several meetings between Taliban and Afghan representatives in 2018-2019 (Maizland, 2020). Even though the situation created by USA withdrawal and Taliban's takeover diminished USA's influence in the region it also brought about the risk of instability. As an indication of how Russia attaches importance to Afghanistan, it hosted an Afghan Taliban delegation in Moscow in 2021 (Euronews, 2021). Therefore, Russia could support Afghanistan and Pakistan's friendly relations as long as they take under control the terrorist organizations and maintain stability.

## **INDIA**

India doesn't have physical contact with Afghanistan but shares a long border with Pakistan (3323 km.). Geographic location of Afghanistan provides for encirclement of Pakistan from west and east. Thus, India would want a pro-Indian government on the west of Pakistan who would cause Pakistan to shift its sources on the west instead of concentrating them on the east. By achieving this, India would have disrupted the strategic depth



## UNDERSTANDING AFGHANISTAN-PAKISTAN RELATIONS IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

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policy of Pakistan. Moreover, it would have cut off one of the recruitment and inspiration source of Kashmiri fighters. In line with this approach, in 1990s, during the internal conflict period, India along with Iran and Central Asian States had supported Northern Alliance against Taliban.

After Taliban regime was ousted from power it had provided assistance to Afghan governments in various sectors ranging from security, governance to energy. Particulary, India actively engaged in establishment of government and economical institutions in accordance with Bonn Conference process which was finalized in 2001. As a clear indication of its growing influence India had established an embassy in Kabul and consulates in Herat, Mazar-e-Sharif, Kandahar and Jalalabad (Pant, 2010: 136-140).

Economically, Afghanistan could provide the ground for India to access to Central Asian markets as well. In fact, India's ambition in Cenral Asia is related with China's increasing presence in the region which induced it to work out "Connect Central Asia Policy". It is a comprehensive plan that contains policies which aim to establish "political, security, economic, and cultural connections" in the region (Jha, 2022).

In this regard, India had built a road in Afghanistan in 2008 that would connect landlocked Afghanistan to Gulf of Oman and Chabahar port of Iran through one of the shortest routes (Naqvi, 2015: 209-210). Chabahar port is significant for India's regional economic interests. It is being operated by Indian since Decemeber 2018 (Anadolu Agency, 2019). India is "the primary investor in Chabar Port" which enables it to counter the economic influence of Pakistan and China that they have gained through the port of Gwadar (Aliasgary-Ekstrom, 2021).

Balancing China's supremacy in the region has been another factor that has pushed India to develop good relations with Afghanistan. Taking into account China's security sensitivities India wanted to have

leverage in Afghanistan that could be used against China. Furthermore, in recent years, India has been expanding its political influence along with economic and military power. In line with this, it has adopted more active foreign policy approach. It has been developing relations with range of countries from Israel, Gulf States, and Central Asian states to Iran and USA. Particularly, its relations with the US is important in the sense their partnership against China's rise in the region.

On the other hand, since Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist party BJP ascended to power in 2014 it has set out to implement Hindutva nationalist agenda. In August 2019, special status of Kashmir in Indian constitution was abrogated, in December 2019 Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) which discriminates some minority groups was accepted in the Indian parliament. These policies sparked nationwide protests and demonstrations and highly increased the tension in the region (Akins, 2020). Hence, India's Hindutva ideology might hamper India's growing influence in the region, especially in Islamic countries. Moreover, considering the Hindutva ideology of India with the re-emergence of the Taliban in Afghanistan, it can be said that India has fallen into a disadvantageous position against Pakistan.

### **CHINA**

China and Afghanistan have a relatively short border (76 km.) at the west of China. This region is located in proximity of China's Xinjiang region where mostly Uyghur population inhabits. China is careful about the exploitation of ethnic and religious sensitivities in the region by foreign powers. Particularly, it perceives threat from Islamic radical factions in Cental Asia and Afghanistan. In this regard, it wouldn't want an unstable country which can not control its borders and who might provide support to separatist East Turkestan Islamic Movement.

## UNDERSTANDING AFGHANISTAN-PAKISTAN RELATIONS IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

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Afghanistan is located at south of Central Asia where most of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) infrastructure passes through. Spillover of any conflict from Afghanistan to Central Asian states could be considered as a big concern for China. Moreover, China's investments in mineral resources in the Afghanistan and its possible linkage to BRI in the future could help to enhance economic prosperity in the region. Hence, China supported a US-Taliban deal. In late 2019 it hosted a conference in Beijing where Afghan and Taliban delegation participated (Maizland, 2020). In this regard, China would want a stable and dependable country on its west.

China and Pakistan have a 596 km. length of border. They settled the border disputes in 1963 in spite of Indian objection. This also marked the beginning of a military alignment (Khan, 2010: 174). Over the years they have cultivated friendly ties emanating from converging interest from security to commerce and economy. China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is one of the prominent instance of partnerships China and Pakistan has developed in recent years. It is a sub project of BRI which was initiated in 2013.

CPEC will create an efficient land-based trade route by linking Kashgar of China in the north with the Gwadar port of Pakistan in the south. This is to be achieved mainly through a vast network of highways, railways and pipelines. It is a mega project which will serve national interests of both countries. Besides this, by enhancing regional economic connectivity and development it will contribute to cooperation between Afghanistan and Pakistan (CPEC, 2023).

China is the leading state of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization which was established in 2001 with the aim of providing for regional security and fighting against "terrorism, ethnic separatism and religious extremism." (UN, 2022). While Pakistan and India are member of the organization, Afghanistan is in observer status. The organization could be used as a useful platform to promote security and stability in the region.

Therefore, as USA recedes from the region China could assume more active role in the region. Nonetheless, China traditionally has adopted policy of nonintervention in internal affairs of any other country. In an emerging multipolar world it remains to be seen if it will assume more assertive role. Hence, it should be expected that China will use all its means to ensure stable relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

### **THE USA**

After years of fighting, the USA and coalition forces withdrew from Afghanistan in August 2021, leaving the war torn country to Taliban forces, accompanied by humiliating scenes. Even though plans on withdrawal had started in ten years back and security responsibility were gradually transitioned to Afghan forces no one had expected such quick collapse of Afghan security establishment.

Actually, the outcome was result of policy shift in the USA's foreign policy approach which had started during Obama term. In a speech delivered at West Point in 2014 the USA president Obama had pointed out that the USA had not had to use military power for all the international problems by saying, "Just because we have the best hammer does not mean that every problem is a nail" (The White House, 2014).

This obviously indicated that the USA was planning to leave interventionist approach that it had pursued in the post-Cold War period. Trump had come to power with the slogan of "America first" and denounced globalist and multilateralist approaches (Çakır, 2020: 19). In line with his campaign pledges, he initiated the talks with Taliban in October 2018 (Al Jazeera, 2018).

The USA government and Taliban signed so-called Doha agreement in February 2020 (Maizland, 2020). Although Biden administration had come to power to reverse Trump's foreign policy he stucked to the same course

## UNDERSTANDING AFGHANISTAN-PAKISTAN RELATIONS IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

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inducted by previous administration, only making end date 31 August, instead of May (BBC, 2021). Therefore, it can be argued that the USA will maintain its diminished presence in the region and will continue to secure its interests by cooperating with its regional partners. In this regard, Pakistan has gained critical importance in USA's South Asia aspirations.

During Trump administration the USA-Pakistan relations underwent a troubled period. Trump had moved India to fore front in Afghanistan policy while placing Pakistan in backward position (Yesevi, 2019: 6). He openly denounced Pakistan's policies in the region and declared to cut financial aid (NTV, 2018). It was a critical reversal after years of partnership in war against terror and brought about kind of disappointment in Pakistani public sentiment.

The change in the USA's policy crystalized the China-Pakistan, the USA-India alignment which had come into existence following Sino-India war in 1962 (Siddiqi, 2018: 21). Nonetheless, allegations put forward by Pakistan's ousted Prime Minister Imran Khan demonstrates that the USA is not willing to leave Pakistan to China's area of influence (CNN, 2022). Apparently, the Pakistani army, which advocated a more balanced policy against both great power, was not pleased with Imran Khan's biased policy stemming from his admiration for China (Rafiq, 2022). Therefore, it can be argued that the USA would continue to be effective in the region in the sense that Pakistan supports its policy of not allowing Afghanistan to fall back to instability and become haven for terrorist organizations.

### ***CENTRAL ASIAN REBUPLICS (CARS)***

Afghanistan shares borders with three of the CARs. The total length of border with Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan is 2305 km. (804 km. with Turkmenistan, 144 km. with Uzbekistan, 1357 km. with Tajikistan). Securing the border against illegal crossings is one of the important

factors that affects the relationship between the CARs and Afghanistan. During the internal conflict period in 1990s most of the CARs supported the Northern Alliance because of its ethnic composition. Moreover, the fear that Islamic radicalism might have spilled over their territories had led them to cooperate against Taliban movement (Maizland-Farani, 2014: 60). As the same threat still persist for the CARs today, instability and threat of radical terrorism are main factors that shapes their policies towards the Afghanistan.

Pakistan and CARs share close cultural and historical ties but geographically Afghanistan separates them from the Central Asia. Hence, Pakistan's connection with the region must pass through Afghanistan territory. As it is the case for Afghanistan, Pakistan's ports, such as Karachi, Qasim and Gwadar (developing) provide for an outlet for landlocked Central Asian region. When CPEC is activated the connectivity between CARs and Pakistan will gain more importance. Therefore, the stability of the Afghanistan is crucial for the peace and prosperity of the whole Central Asia and South East region. For instance, the initiatives like Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline project can enhance economic vitality in the region. In this respect, it can be said that as long as Pakistan assists Afghanistan in its struggle of controlling terrorist organizations the CARs would be willing to cooperate with both countries.

### CONCLUSION

At the beginning of the millenium only super power of the time the USA was shocked by an assymetric attack on its territory. In the aftermath of 9/11, limits of US's hard power were first tested in Afghanistan later in Iraq. Obama had recognized in 2014 that it was not necessary to use hard power to settle every problem the USA faces. This was indication of strategic shift in US's foreign policy with certain ramifations for rest of the world.

## UNDERSTANDING AFGHANISTAN-PAKISTAN RELATIONS IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

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Departure from hegemonic policy resulted with iconic withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021. As the international system has moved from unipolarity to multipolarity multiple poles has emerged with their political, economical and security ties. Structural shifts in world politics impacts the relations of countries in global as well as regional context. In this regard, the study has attempted to analyze bilateral relations of two important South Asian countries in a multilateral context as the world has been undergoing systemic changes.

There are many bilateral factors that positively or negatively affect the relations of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Among them, common religious, historical and social issues affect the relations positively. Economical ties have potential to develop as stability and security situation improves. The political systems of both countries have historically been a source of tension when they differed. However, the representation of religious sensitivities in the political systems of the countries creates positive effects on the relations. For instance, although Pakistan's political system is not based on Islamic rules, reflection of the Islamic sensitivities of the people on the political attitudes of the politicians brings the two countries closer. In connection with this, Pakistan's quest for strategic depth urges it to strive for a friendly government at the helm of Afghanistan with which it can develop good relations.

On the other hand, due to the disputed border, the geography factor stands out as an issue that negatively affects the relations. Related with unresolved border, demography is a factor that has potential to bring out problems. Especially, Pashtun nationalist movements on both sides of border may strain the relations. TTP's sporadic attacks at Pakistani targets and Pakistan's response to them creates tension in the relations as well. Repatriation of refugees to Afghanistan is another chronic nuisance between the two countries that remains to be addressed.

## ULUSLARARASI KRİZ VE SİYASET ARAŞTIRMALARI DERGİSİ

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When the Taliban has returned to power after withdrawal of coalition forces global and regional actors had to recalculate their position vis a vis Afghanistan. Most countries expect the Taliban administration to form an inclusive government and reassure the international community that it will not pursue the same brutal policies it has implemented during its previous period of government. Pakistan played curicial role in negotiations between the US and the Taliban. It seems that the US will rely on Pakistan in assisting the Taliban not to allow terrorist organizations to flourish in the region to threaten the national security of the US.

China, Russia and Central Asian states consider their security and economical interests strictly tied to stability of Afghanistan and they support projects that will enhance cooperation and connection in the reigon. India may seek to establish ties with the Taliban in order to obviate Pakistan's advantage in achieving strategic depth policy. Even though the US's depature may be considered to serve Iran's national interests Taliban's close connection with Saudi Arabia and Gulf States and possibility of resurgence of Sunni radical organizations in the region may cause concern among Iranian leadership.

As the international system evolves from a unipolar world to a multipolar world with different challenges, the debates on whether the situation will lead to a balance of power between great powers or a polarization between democratic and autocratic states continue. While the international community is struggling to recover from social and economic problems caused by Covid 19, the Ukraine war threatens the peace in Europe and the US-Chinese rivalry in the Pacific causes tensions over Taiwan.

The South Asian region, which is under the influence of China and Russia due to its geographical proximity, is also open to the influence of the US due to its relations with Pakistan and India. Enduring problems between Afghanistan and Pakistan still persists and requires both



## UNDERSTANDING AFGHANISTAN-PAKISTAN RELATIONS IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

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countries to stabilise their internal political situation in order to review and deal with them. However, it can be argued that while the region enters a period where it will be temporarily relieved from direct great rivalry, this provides an opportunity for Afghanistan and Pakistan to focus on bilateral relations in order to work out on ongoing problems and improve cooperation.

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