

AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN AFTER 2021: A CYCLE OF MISTRUST AND MISPERCEPTION

Seyit Ali AVCU* - Mohammad Khan SULTANI**

Abstract

This study examines the persistent security dilemma between Afghanistan and Pakistan in the post-2021 period following the withdrawal of U.S. forces and the return of the Taliban to power. Despite shared religious, cultural, and historical ties, bilateral relations have deteriorated, marked by border clashes, mutual accusations, and deepening mistrust. Employing a historical-constructivist security-dilemma framework, the paper argues that perception-based insecurity, rather than direct military threat, lies at the core of the conflict. Defensive measures taken by each side, such as Pakistan's border fencing and counterterrorism operations and Afghanistan's refusal to recognize the Durand Line and its limited control over non-state actors, are interpreted by the other as offensive and hostile. The study highlights the role of colonial legacies, national identity, domestic political constraints, and transnational militant groups, particularly the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), in perpetuating cycles of fear and retaliation. Based on a qualitative analysis of official documents, academic literature, and post-2021 developments, the paper concludes that without sustained confidence-building measures, cooperative border management, and recognition of militancy as a shared threat, the Afghanistan-Pakistan security dilemma is likely to persist despite ongoing diplomatic engagement.

Keywords: *Afghanistan–Pakistan Relations, Durand Line, Security Dilemma, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)*

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2021 SONRASI AFGANİSTAN VE PAKİSTAN: GÜVENSİZLİK VE YANLIŞ ALGI DÖNGÜSÜ

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Öz

Bu çalışma, ABD güçlerinin çekilmesi ve Taliban'ın 2021 yılında yeniden iktidara gelmesinin ardından Afganistan ile Pakistan arasında devam eden güvenlik ikilemini incelemektedir. Dinî, kültürel ve tarihsel ortaklıklara rağmen, iki ülke arasındaki ilişkiler sınır çatışmaları, karşılıklı suçlamalar ve artan güvensizlikle daha da kötüleşmiştir. Tarihsel-konstrüktivist bir güvenlik ikilemi yaklaşımını benimseyen bu çalışma, çatışmanın temelinde doğrudan askerî tehditlerden ziyade algıya dayalı güvensizliğin yattığını savunmaktadır. Pakistan'ın sınır çizleme politikaları ve terörle mücadele operasyonları ile Afganistan'ın Durand Hattı'nı tanımayı reddetmesi ve devlet dışı aktörler üzerindeki sınırlı kontrolü, karşı tarafça saldırgan ve tehditkâr adımlar olarak algılanmaktadır. Çalışma, sömürge döneminden kalan mirasların, ulusal kimlik tartışmalarının, iç siyasi kırılganlıkların ve özellikle Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) gibi sınır aşan silahlı grupların korku ve misilleme döngüsünü nasıl beslediğini ortaya koymaktadır. 2021 sonrası gelişmeler, resmî belgeler ve akademik literatüre dayanan nitel analiz sonucunda, güven artırıcı önlemler, ortak sınır yönetimi ve militanlığın ortak bir tehdit olarak kabul edilmemesi durumunda Afganistan-Pakistan güvenlik ikileminin diplomatik temaslara rağmen devam edeceği sonucuna varılmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Afganistan-Pakistan ilişkileri, Durand Hattı, Güvenlik İkilemi, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)

Introduction

This paper examines one of the most perplexing security rivalries in South Asia between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Since the Taliban returned to power in 2021 following the withdrawal of U.S. forces, the two countries have experienced repeated border clashes and escalating tensions, despite Pakistan's historical links with the Taliban. The recent attacks on the Kandahar airport oil depot and residential areas in Kabul highlight the imminent danger of the conflict escalating into a full-fledged war (Yawar, 2026). Furthermore, mediation efforts by Türkiye, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia in October 2025, and more recently by China, temporarily eased the fighting. However, they failed to end the conflict, and the parties continued to blame one another (Shahzad et al., 2026). Against this backdrop, the study addresses three core questions: why Afghanistan and Pakistan, despite their shared religious, cultural, and historical ties, continue to perceive one another as security threats after 2021; to what extent contemporary tensions are rooted in and exacerbated by colonial-era legacies, particularly the unresolved Durand Line dispute; and how cross-border militant activity especially by the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has reinforced cycles of mistrust and retaliation (Shah et al., 2024). These questions are significant because, although Afghanistan–Pakistan relations have been widely examined in terms of borders and power politics, limited attention has been paid to the post-2021 period through the lens of the security dilemma, where fear, perception, and misinterpretation, rather than direct military confrontation, serve as the primary drivers of conflict (Asma et al., 2024).

Regional security dynamics have shifted significantly following the U.S. withdrawal, the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan, and the increased activity and attacks by the TTP. Some perspectives suggest that external powers—such as the United States—could be benefiting from this volatile situation to constrain Chinese and Russian influence, particularly given the presence of groups like The Islamic

State – Khorasan Province (ISIS-K). Given the complex interplay of deep-rooted historical, political, international, and regional factors, it is essential to reassess the situation with a fresh perspective (Popalzay, 2024).

The main argument of this article is that the persistence of the Afghanistan–Pakistan security dilemma is driven not by material military capabilities, but by historically constructed, incompatible state identities and path-dependent enmity rooted in the colonial legacy of the Durand Line, which historical constructivism explains by showing how past beliefs and narratives continuously shape contemporary threat perceptions and hostile interactions between the two states. The defensive measures of each country, Pakistan’s border fences, and the demand to acknowledge the Durand Line and Afghanistan to endure the pressure of the outside, and a tolerance of certain militant groups, are regarded by the other as a threat. Old historical issues, national identity, and the actions of non-state actors perpetuate this cycle. The paper concludes that the absence of trust-building will not allow cooperation and will lead both parties to continue despite the existence of diplomatic negotiations between the two countries sharing the same religion (Azam, 2024).

Other explanations, such as attributing the conflict to religious extremism or ideology, are not complete explanations of the problem. In the same way, laying the blame solely on the Taliban or the military of Pakistan overlooks the history and structural distrust. This paper utilizes a historical-constructivist framework for security studies. This approach prioritizes the role of perceptions, historical context, and miscommunication, moving beyond a narrow focus on politics.

This study employs a theory-testing qualitative case study method, utilizing process tracing (Van Evera, 1997) to assess the explanatory power of the historical-constructivist framework against empirical evidence from the 2021–2026 period. In a theory-testing case study method, the researcher begins with a pre-existing theory and uses a

single, carefully selected case to examine whether that theory holds explanatory power in a real-world setting. Rather than trying to build a new theory from the ground up, the goal is to assess the theory's validity by deriving specific predictions or hypotheses from it and then comparing those against the empirical evidence of the case. If the evidence aligns with the theory's expectations, the theory is strengthened; if not, its limitations are exposed, potentially leading to refinement or rejection. As Van Evera (1997) describes, this approach is particularly useful for identifying the scope and conditions under which a theory applies, offering a rigorous test of its causal logic without the need for large-scale statistical analysis (Van Evera, 1997: 55). Process-tracing is defined as "the systematic examination of evidence selected and analyzed in light of research questions and hypotheses posed by the investigator" (Collier, 2011, p. 823).

The security dilemma between Pakistan and Afghanistan after 2021 raises several critical questions. First, Pakistan argues that Afghanistan is using its territory to launch attacks against it. This claim requires careful examination, as there is ground-level evidence suggesting this is a central issue that must be addressed. Second, the study must examine Pakistan's ethnic composition. Decades of political imbalance within Pakistan have fuelled internal tensions and created space for non-state actors such as the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) and the Sindhudesh Liberation Army (SLA)—not just the TTP. The roots of these insecurities lie in Pakistan's own political asymmetries. Therefore, analysing the causes of internal instability in Pakistan offers a broader perspective on the overall problem.

The paper is divided into three major sections. In the first section, we critique the existing literature on explaining the conflict between Afghanistan and Pakistan, identifying the limitations of purely strategic and materialist approaches. The second section lays out the potential theories, especially historical constructivism, to explain the conflict, establishing the conceptual framework of the security dilemma, path-

dependent enmity, and incompatible constitutional structures. The third section presents the empirical analysis of the Afghanistan–Pakistan case, demonstrating how the Durand Line functions as a constitutive symbol of colonial legacy, how domestic instability and transnational militancy reinforce the cycle of violence, and how regional dimensions and diplomatic diversification shape bilateral tensions, ultimately supporting the argument that historically constructed identities and perceptions—not material capabilities—drive the persistent security dilemma between the two states.

Literature Review

Scholars have consistently indicated that relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan remain characterized by deep distrust, shifting threat perceptions, and persistent security tensions, particularly following the Taliban’s return to power in 2021. This bilateral relationship has been extensively examined through the lens of the security dilemma (Khan, 2025; Zarawar et al., 2024; Kamran and Chitrali, 2025). Khan (2025) states that the governance of the Islamic Emirate has increased the perceived vulnerability of Pakistan, whereas Zarawar et al. (2024) focus on the differences in relations between Pakistan and the Taliban and the past Kabul government, and on how conflicting security priorities keep the bilateral relationship on the edge of conflict. Similarly, Kamran and Chitrali (2025) indicate that China may be a confidence-building actor, but their discussion does not incorporate the domestic factors within Afghanistan completely. Together, these are studies that focus on the continuity of mistrust, but this time, the Pakistani point of view takes the lead, and little opportunity is provided to understand how the Afghan population perceives threats.

The other research direction is the TTP-Afghan Taliban nexus as one of the key obstacles to stable relations. Asma, Akhtar, and Ullah (2024) are inclined to demonstrate that ideological and operational correlations between the two groups exacerbate the security issues of

Pakistan and diminish the chances of bilateral cooperation. Khan and Iqbal (2025) further claim that the resurgence of the TTP under a careless Afghan government poses risks to intersectional and regional security, but their work does not provide adequate field-based confirmation on claims regarding said militant revival. Ali (2014) gives a previous Afghanistan-Pakistan insecurity and mutual threats, but his work naturally is pre-2021 changes and thus does not address the post 2021 changes. Combined, this scholarship highlights the destabilizing impact of militant sanctuaries but still fails to consider the side of Afghanistan on the matter, and fails to explain the exact extent of control that Kabul has on the group TTP.

The relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan in terms of trust and mistrust is analysed in terms of a wider historical and political context. Kaleem et al. (2023) document the progress of events leading up to and following 9/11, stating that the shift in ideological solidarity to strategic competition is gradual. Taye and Ahmed (2021) describe the trust-mistrust paradox on the example of regional political psychology, whereas Idrees and Naazer (2022) demonstrate that the lack of meaningful counterterrorism cooperation until 2018 was caused by the suspicion that had existed since the year 2001. Kaleem et al., (2023) also emphasize the long-term shift in trust but fail to consider the changes that occurred once the U.S. withdrew. In general, both works show that mistrust has structural resiliency, yet they do not reflect the strategic environment after 2021.

Several theorists emphasize the role of external forces and multilateral processes. Adem akır (2023) puts Pakistan-Afghanistan relations in a broader global competition and contends that the U.S.-China rivalry forms the regional politics and constrains the bilateral independence (akır, 2023: 45-46). The role of China, as highlighted by Kamran and Chitrali (2025), enhances this view, but Shukla (2011) and Budihas (2011) give a more detailed history of the strategic motives of Pakistan, especially the need to achieve a sense of strategic depth, All

these studies point to the role of external forces and fail to adequately attribute multilateral diplomacy to domestic politics in both states.

After 2021, scholars are more interested in the Taliban coming back and what it would mean to the stability of the region. Akbar (2024) discusses the extent to which Taliban 2.0 has escalated the border insecurity and militancy difficulties facing Pakistan. Although he is less concerned with the internal strategic argument of Pakistan, Popalzay (2024) examines the way in which the Taliban resurgence is transforming regional diplomatic alliances. Adding to these results, Khan and Iqbal (2025) suggest policy directions in decreasing tensions and promoting institutional collaboration and trust building. All these works indicate that the resurgence of the Taliban has intensified the security dilemma and put bilateral engagement avenues in a complex position.

Lastly, the literature on the Durand Line conflict shows that it has continued to influence mistrust. Hashimy (2023) introduces the historical and political background of the disputable situation, whereas Azam (2024) associates the conflict with the larger geopolitical struggle and the conflicting regional interests. Despite providing some useful conceptual understanding, these studies are mostly theoretical, with no empirical investigation into the practice of border management, the socio-economic situation, and realities within frontier communities, and the effects of the latest diplomatic negotiations.

Altogether, the literature at hand gives valuable information on Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, although there are still major gaps. Most of the research focuses on the strategic concerns of Pakistan and provides minimal coverage of Afghanistan narratives. The quality of field-based evidence is usually limited, particularly in terms of the on-the-ground operations of the TTP and Kabul's ability to contain them. Furthermore, although there are works that cover external forces, such as China or the U.S., the other players in the region, including Iran, India, and Central Asian states, are not explored in depth. Lastly, the fast-changing context of the post-2021 period, characterized by a change in domestic

politics in Pakistan and the governance in Afghanistan, is still under-investigated. This study is thus set to fill these gaps by incorporating the views of Afghans, merging factual evidence, and placing bilateral tensions in a larger regional security context.

2. Theoretical Framework: Historical Constructivism

To explain why Afghanistan and Pakistan still view one another as threats despite the Taliban re-taking power in 2021, and to examine the security dilemma, this paper uses a historical-constructivist approach. Historical constructivism emerged as a distinctive approach within International Relations theory that challenges the timeless assumptions of mainstream theories like neorealism by demonstrating that the structures and dynamics of international politics are historically specific rather than eternal givens. As Christian Reus-Smit (2008) explains, if scholars conceive of all human agents as rational egoists animated by universal rationality, “then the stuff of history drops out” (p. 396). In contrast, constructivists attend to the ‘intersubjective beliefs’ that constitute actors’ identities and interests across different epochs. Quentin Bruneau (2021) observes that constructivism is particularly well-suited for historical analysis because it “examines how ideational structures and processes—such as norms, identities, and cultures—constitute actors’ understandings of their interests and shape political outcomes over time” (p. 123). Christian Reus-Smit’s (1999) work demonstrates how different international systems develop fundamentally different institutions based on varying ‘constitutional structures’ comprising beliefs about the moral purpose of the state, sovereignty, and procedural justice, while Rodney Bruce Hall (1999) shows how transformations from dynastic to national sovereignty reconfigured the international system by altering not only states’ internal legitimacy but also their external behavior and understandings of interest.

Together, these scholars illuminate the core contributions of historical constructivism: demonstrating the historical specificity of the modern

international system, revealing how intersubjective beliefs shape state identities and interests, and emphasizing the role of constitutive ideas in shaping international dynamics. As Bruneau (2021) notes, historical constructivism “privileges the study of systemic change, demonstrating how transformations in the ideational foundations of international orders produce new configurations of power and purpose” (p. 128), and reveals how “different international systems are characterized by different logics of anarchy, depending on the identities and purposes of their constituent units” (p. 125). Methodologically, historical constructivism is interpretive, seeking to understand the meanings actors attached to their world rather than imposing contemporary categories on the past. As Reus-Smit (2008) argues, this approach marks constructivist history off from both positivist social science seeking law-like generalizations and traditional intellectual history treating ideas as autonomous from political practice. Bruneau (2021) emphasizes that historical constructivism “is not simply the application of constructivist concepts to historical cases, but a distinctive orientation that recognizes history as the very medium through which international politics is constituted” (p. 132).

Historical constructivists employ methodological pluralism in their approach to understanding the past, combining interpretive analysis, process-tracing, and careful attention to actors’ own understandings of their world. This methodological diversity reflects the constructivist commitment to recovering the meanings that structured political action rather than imposing contemporary categories on historical actors. As Bruneau (2021) notes, historical constructivists “employ a range of methods, from discourse analysis to genealogical investigation, all aimed at recovering the meanings that structured political action in different historical contexts” (p. 130). This approach distinguishes historical constructivism from positivist social science that seeks law-like generalizations, as it recognizes that the categories and concepts through which actors understand their world are themselves products of historical processes that require careful interpretive recovery.

Historical constructivists engage with the security dilemma concept but explain it in fundamentally different terms than traditional realist theories, treating it as a socially constructed phenomenon rather than an inevitable structural condition arising from anarchy. As Raluca-Andreea Manea (2018) argues, constructivism allows for “a proper apprehension of the security dilemma through transcending its rigid understanding as an outcome of structure of the international system” (p. 20), focusing instead on “the manner in which the security dilemma emerges as a result of the social construction of world politics, the subjective understandings conceived by actors on the international arena and the ensuing perceptions about their counterparts and their actions” (p. 21). Because threat perceptions depend on how states identify each other through language, historical analogies, and shared understandings, constructivists demonstrate that security dilemmas vary across historical contexts and can be transformed through changes in identity and norms (Er, 2010; Frederking, 2000). Research by Win Tan Er (2010) illustrates this through analysis of how the Truman Administration’s invocation of analogies to 1930s appeasement shaped the identification of North Korea “as part of a monolithic communist bloc that had to be deterred” (p. 5), while Brian Frederking (2000) shows how superpowers resolved their security dilemma through the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF Treaty) by developing new shared understandings and identities. By demonstrating how threat perceptions are constituted through intersubjective meanings rather than material capabilities alone, historical constructivists open space for understanding how security dilemmas might be resolved rather than simply managed across different historical contexts.

While historical institutionalism stresses ‘sticky’ institutions, historical constructivism argues for path dependence in the realm of ideas: the cultural meanings and intersubjective beliefs established in the past continue to shape contemporary practices. This approach explicitly breaks from materialist histories by showing how constitutive ideas—like sovereignty or the moral purpose of the state—create

cognitive paths that constrain and enable actors. The past endures not just in rules, but in the ‘sticky’ beliefs and identities through which actors define themselves and their world (Reus-Smit, 2008).

From a historical constructivist perspective, a country’s domestic structure constitutes the interpretive site where state identity is formed through shared understandings of historical experience. As Krotz (2015) argues, historical domestic construction refers to “dominant interpretations of the meaning and implications of historical experiences”(p.24) that become embedded within a state’s political culture, shaping national role conceptions and the state’s sense of purpose. Rather than treating domestic politics as merely institutional arrangements or material capabilities, this approach views the domestic realm as the locus where ‘constitutional structures’—deep, historically embedded beliefs about the ‘moral purpose of the state’ originate and are sustained (Reus-Smit, 1999). These domestically constituted identities function as cognitive and normative filters through which external events are interpreted, shaping how states perceive others and construct threat perceptions. Thus, for historical constructivists, domestic structure matters not as a constraint on state action but as the very source of the intersubjective understandings that constitute state identity and, consequently, foreign policy behavior.

Building on the historical constructivist framework outlined above, this paper evaluates the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Pakistan and Afghanistan view each other as threats because their state identities are constituted by incompatible constitutional structures (Reus-Smit, 1999). Pakistan’s domestic structure produces a Westphalian identity rooted in territorial sovereignty and fixed borders, while the Taliban’s domestic structure produces a transnational identity rooted in Islamic solidarity that rejects the Durand Line as legitimate. This clash in the very ‘moral purpose’ of the state generates existential threat perception.

Hypothesis 2: This conflict remains intractable because it is sustained by a path-dependent logic of enmity (Wendt, 1992). Historical grievances have constituted Pakistan and Afghanistan as ‘enemies’—a social role resistant to change—such that even the Taliban’s 2021 takeover has failed to transform the relationship.

3. Empirical Analysis: The Security Dilemma in Afghanistan–Pakistan Relations

This paper reveals that Afghanistan–Pakistan tensions are deeply rooted in colonial history, contested identities, and socially constructed narratives of threat and legitimacy. Understanding these factors is essential for explaining why the conflict persists and why purely strategic or security-based solutions have repeatedly failed. Instead of analyzing the conflict solely through material military capabilities, the framework focuses on perceptions, identity, history, and non-state actors as primary sources of insecurity.

The core argument is that historical and identity-driven influences form the narratives and perceptions of threat for each state. The unresolved Durand Line issue, colonial-era territorial boundaries, the question of Pashtunistan, and decades of mistrust between 1947 and 2021 constitute these historical legacies (Booth and Wheeler, 2008; Jervis, 1978; Wendt, 1992). These legacies define how each state views the other’s intentions—predominantly as hostile, even when both act in self-defense.

We use the term security dilemma to describe a situation in which measures taken by one state to enhance its security are perceived as threatening by another, leading to countermeasures that increase insecurity for both. In the Afghanistan–Pakistan conflict, Pakistan’s efforts to increase its armed forces along the Durand Line and conduct counterterrorism operations are viewed by Afghanistan as violations of sovereignty. Conversely, Afghanistan’s military build-up and its

historical contacts with the Taliban and TTP are seen by Pakistan as direct security threats. This dilemma is intensified by non-state actors such as the TTP, which operate across the porous border and blur the line between internal and external security, increasing mistrust, complicating accountability, and reinforcing hostile perceptions.

3.1. The Foundational Clash of Constitutional Structures and Sovereignty

From a historical constructivist perspective, a state's identity is formed through shared interpretations of its historical experiences. These interpretations become embedded in political culture and shape the state's sense of purpose and national role. Rather than viewing domestic politics as mere institutional arrangements, this approach sees the domestic realm as the source of deep, historically rooted beliefs about the moral purpose of the state. These domestically formed identities act as filters through which states interpret external events, shaping how they perceive others and construct threats.

The Durand Line (Map 1) functions as precisely such a constitutive symbol. To Pakistan, it is a fixed international border; to Afghanistan, it is a colonial imposition forced upon Amir Abdur Rahman Khan Barakzai in 1893 without ratification by any representative Afghan body, and historically rejected by successive governments, including the present one (Rubin, 1995). The two states are locked into overriding historical accounts that complicate cooperation. Defensive behaviour is explained by old-time anticipation of aggression, and even technical border control is transformed into a geopolitical struggle. Therefore, the Durand Line is not merely a border but a construct of mutually reinforcing insecurity.

Regardless of the regime or which party holds power, Afghan governments have consistently rejected the Durand Line. As Harrison states, "Ironically, during its rule in Kabul, the Taliban refused to endorse the Durand Line despite pressure from Islamabad. Afghan

President Hamid Karzai has also resisted, calling it “a line of hatred that raised a wall between the two brothers.”(Harrison, 2009). The border separates Pashtun tribes and disrupts centuries-old social, cultural, and economic networks. Pakistan exploits the Durand Line to implement coercive border policies—fencing, expansion of outposts, firing incidents—which Afghanistan perceives as violations of its sovereignty. Afghan airstrikes by Pakistan (2022–2026) are framed by Islamabad as legitimate responses to cross-border terrorism, yet they also reflect a troubling power imbalance: a stronger Pakistan imposing its will on a weaker, diplomatically constrained Afghanistan, often at the expense of civilian lives. Afghanistan claims that Pakistan uses border closures at Torkham or Chaman to impose political or economic pressure when bilateral disputes arise.

Map 1. The Durand Line (National Geographic Society, 2025)



Conversely, Pakistan argues that Afghanistan's non-recognition of the border endangers its territorial integrity. TTP fighters are cross-border militants whose main origin is Afghan territory. Pakistan contends that Afghanistan either knowingly fails to stop militant operations or is unable to govern its territory, whereas Afghanistan rejects these claims as unjustified means to further destabilize the region (Rubin, 1995; Rashid, 2022). The Durand Line's colonial roots and rival Afghan Pakistani national identities have generated repeated incompatibilities in threat perceptions (Rubin, 1995; Misra, 2004; Rashid, 2022).

These perceptions contribute to a security dilemma where defensive policies by one party are seen as offensive by the other. To Pakistan, border fencing, insisting on Durand Line recognition, and compelling Kabul to enforce control over the TTP are presented as necessary security measures (Rashid, 2022; Misra, 2004; Asma, Akhtar, and Ullah, 2024). Afghanistan views these as efforts to enforce territorial claims and weaken sovereignty (Rubin, 1995; Rashid, 2022). The unwillingness to acknowledge the border, insufficient action against the TTP, and attempts to assert independence are seen by Pakistan as direct aggression (Asma et al., 2024; International Crisis Group, 2023).

Pakistan's strategic community has long worried that a strong, unified Afghanistan would renew historical claims to Pashtun-dominated regions east of the Durand Line. This fear is amplified by Afghanistan's past rejection of the border and its opposition to Pakistan's UN membership in 1947. Pakistan fears that a strong Afghan state could practice territorial revisionism, that Pashtun identity politics in Pakistani frontier provinces could be mobilized by Afghan nationalism, and that Afghanistan's relations with India might be used as leverage against Pakistan. Conversely, Afghanistan fears that Pakistan does not desire a strong Afghanistan, as that would reduce Afghan dependency. Afghanistan alleges that Pakistan meddles in its politics to ensure leverage over Kabul—using border closures, trade restrictions, intelligence activities, and differential treatment of Afghan refugees as political

pressure. Afghanistan also claims that Pakistan has traditionally favored militant networks to affect its internal affairs. These mutually reinforcing fears render it exceedingly difficult for either side to interpret the other's conduct as benign. The competition is structurally embedded in the regional order, consistent with Walt's (1987) argument that perceived vulnerability drives alliance behavior and external balancing.

Pakistan's creation of a border fence, fortified checkpoints, and biometric systems—undertaken as an effort to curb illegal migration and counterterrorism—is framed domestically as a sovereign right and necessity (International Crisis Group, 2026). But Afghanistan perceives this as a unilateral alteration of a contentious boundary, implemented without consultation and usually by force. Afghanistan claims the fence interferes with local trade, grazing paths, and separates families. Before the fences, there was free flow of local trade, border crossing, and joint families living across the line. Afghanistan argues that Pakistan suppressed its economic activity through border controls, such as stalling fuel tankers, closing crossings during political disputes, or restricting Afghan exports. Afghanistan also points to incidents where Pakistani troops crossed the perceived border to construct posts, which Kabul believes constitutes encroachment. Pakistan claims it must prevent militant infiltration and human trafficking, that fortification is a defence strategy, not expansion, and that any Afghan opposition to fencing reflects a denial of security realities. The security dilemma manifests here: Pakistan views Afghanistan's responses to fencing as aggression, while Afghanistan views fencing as coercion. The defensive reasoning of each party offends the other, increasing mistrust.

3.2.Domestic Instability, Transnational Militancy, and the Cycle of Violence

Domestic political structures also influence the dilemma. The civil-military imbalance in Pakistan, ethnic concerns, and internal uprisings make the country more sensitive to Afghan policies (Zarawar, Alokoyay,

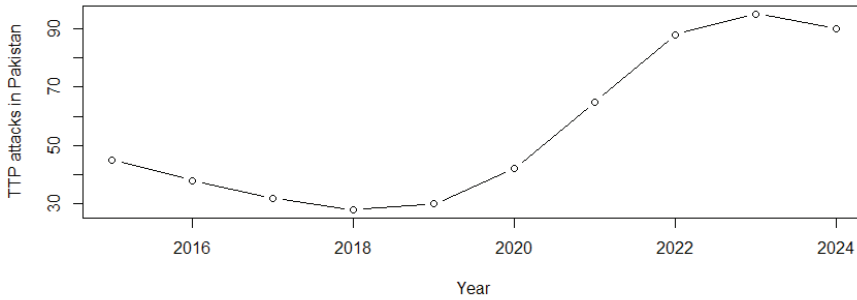
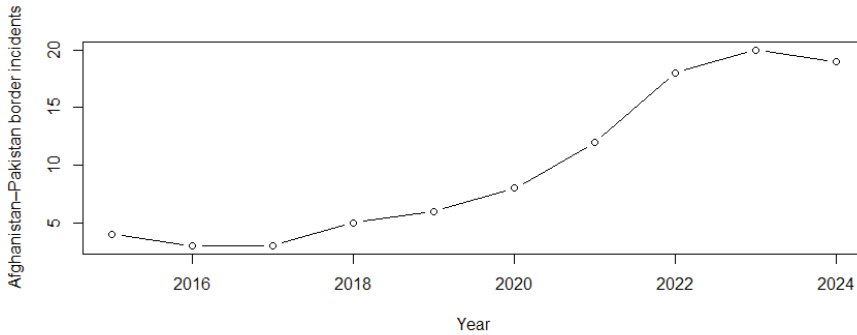
and Numan, 2024; Ali, 2014). The same applies to Afghanistan in terms of government constraints and limited financial capabilities affecting its defensive stances (Rubin, 1995; Rashid, 2022). Domestic instability leads to heightened dependence on external threat discourse and exacerbates bilateral distrust (Kaleem et al., 2023; Taye and Ahmed, 2021).

Arguments on both sides point out that insecurity is strengthened by patterns of internal governance. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan are underdeveloped compared to Punjab (Khan, 2025). Militant recruitment is enabled by limited economic opportunity and insufficient state penetration. Pakistan attributes this instability partly to alleged Afghan or Indian backing of insurgent elements. As Siddiqi states “Daud supported the insurgency in Pakistani Baluchistan, sheltering rebels and establishing training camps on Afghan territory, a resumption of Afghanistan’s proxy intervention in Pakistan.” (Siddiqi, 2008: 18). Afghanistan claims that Pakistan’s own extractive economic policies—such as using natural resources in Baluchistan without redistribution—have led to inequalities (Harrison, 1981; Siddiqi, 2008). Pakistan’s use of unrest in Baluchistan and the tribal belt as a pretext for military-centered policies has spilled into the Afghanistan borderlands. Stabilization of domestic instability is thus perceived in terms of external threats: Pakistan sees Afghanistan’s diplomatic acts as possible sources of separatism, while Afghanistan views Pakistan as dominating the frontier rather than defending it. Thus, internal political economy is directly connected to external security behavior.

Non-state actors—particularly the TTP, ISIS-K, BLA, and SLA—aggravate the problem (Asma et al., 2024; International Crisis Group, 2026). Their transnational nature creates accusations, retaliation, and political pressure that increase the difficulty of trusting one another (Zarawar et al., 2024). This framework appreciates that Kabul’s power to control such groups is minimal, and internal political division in Islamabad is another contributing factor to insecurity (Kamran and Chitrali, 2025). Pakistan argues that the recent surge in TTP violence

is linked to militant sanctuaries operating from Afghan territory. From Islamabad's perspective, the Afghan government is either unwilling or unable to restrain these groups, forcing Pakistan to rely on airstrikes, stricter border controls, and other defensive countermeasures. Afghanistan offers a contrasting interpretation: Kabul maintains that Pakistan exaggerates Afghan responsibility to justify its own actions and externalize a problem with deep roots inside Pakistan. Afghan officials argue that Pakistani airstrikes within Afghan territory violate sovereignty, cause civilian harm, and further destabilize border regions. They also point out that Pakistan historically tolerated—or at times strategically supported—certain militant networks, which later contributed to regional instability on both sides. These opposing narratives reflect how each state interprets the same events through its own security lens, reinforcing mistrust and perpetuating the broader security dilemma.

This path-dependent enmity is empirically observable in the cyclical relationship between TTP attacks and border incidents. The graphs (Figure 1&2) below indicate a rise in TTP attack trends followed by tensions on the border. The graphs share nearly the same trend, suggesting that Pakistan initiates border confrontations following TTP attacks on Pakistani soil. This directly translates to Pakistan blaming Afghanistan for the attacks and retaliating by causing tensions on the border. This pattern illustrates Wendt's (1992) argument that anarchy is socially constructed: the "enemy" role, once constituted, becomes self-reinforcing through repeated practices of threat and retaliation.

Figure 1. TTP attacks in Pakistan. (SATP, 2024; PIPS, 2022)**Figure 2. Afghanistan-Pakistan Border Incidents (CRSS, 2025
UNSC, 2025)**

This problem of misunderstanding strengthens a vicious circle of fear and retaliation (Booth and Wheeler, 2008; Jervis, 1978; Wendt, 1992). The cycle of militant violence and security dilemma produces persistent insecurity, where self-defense by one party is repeatedly perceived as an attack by the other, and cycles of intensification preclude opportunities for stabilization.

3.3. Regional Dimensions, Diplomatic Diversification, and Mitigation Pathways

Regional and international forces impact how each government understands the other's actions. Perceived threats are modified by

the strategic interests of China, U.S. intervention in the region, Iran's increasing role, India's presence, and multilateral forums like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) (Çakır, 2023; Kamran and Chitrali, 2025; Shukla, 2011; Budihas, 2011). These combinations lead to further mistrust, border disputes, deficient counterterrorism cooperation, and insufficient diplomatic development (Booth and Wheeler, 2008; Jervis, 1978).

India has historically been a significant Afghan trade and development partner (Dupree, 2002; Mukhopadhyay, 2014). Since 2021, Afghanistan has intensified engagement with India to diversify economic support and diplomatic relations. The 2025 upgrade of India's Technical Mission in Kabul to a full Embassy is a key development. Afghanistan sees this as a pragmatic decision: diversifying partnerships, fostering humanitarian access, and reducing dependence on Pakistan. India presents it as a functional step to manage development programs and consular services. But Pakistan sees this as a threat to its strategic depth in Afghanistan, believing that anti-Pakistan sentiment will grow if Afghan-Indian relations continue to develop. Afghanistan claims that Pakistan interprets normal diplomacy as hostile due to entrenched insecurity. Afghanistan seeks autonomy, not alignment against Pakistan. This divergence reflects the security dilemma's logic: identical behaviours generate opposite interpretations depending on historical fears. The Taliban government's closer ties with India, despite Pakistan's past role in facilitating their return to power, demonstrate that path-dependent enmity resets regime change (Wendt, 1999).

Notably, the conflict cannot be attributed to religious, cultural, or civilizational differences. Pakistan and Afghanistan share a common religious identity, culture, and expansive social connections across the border. These similarities have not succeeded in preventing escalation nor led to long-term trust. This proves that the conflict is not caused

by incompatibility of ideologies; rather, the predominant factors are geopolitical, security, and material (Rubin, 1995; Giustozzi, 2016). The dynamics are driven by border control, militant violence, territorial sovereignty, and shifting threat perceptions, not religious divergence. This supports the explanatory capacity of the security dilemma model over civilizational explanations.

Nevertheless, the framework also outlines ways to mitigate tensions, including confidence-building strategies, joint management along the border, regional mediation, and institutional dialogue (Khan and Iqbal, 2025; Akbar, 2024). These perception-based insecurities are necessary to explain why the security dilemma remains persistent and to find practical strategies for stabilization and long-term cooperation (Jervis, 1978; Asma et al., 2024).

Conclusion

Afghanistan-Pakistan relations are trapped in a long-term security dilemma driven by the Durand Line dispute, conflicting sovereignty claims, frontier underdevelopment, militant networks, and shifting regional alignments. Both sides hold legitimate security concerns, and their interactions are shaped by historical expectations of aggression. Pakistan's interference and coercion mirror the very claims Afghanistan makes about Pakistani interference and coercion. Neither narrative is entirely objective; both reflect the structural constraints of fear and uncertainty.

Combined, the empirical data support both hypotheses. The first hypothesis is supported by evidence that Pakistan and Afghanistan possess fundamentally incompatible constitutional structures: Pakistan's Westphalian identity, rooted in territorial sovereignty and fixed borders, clashes with Afghanistan's transnational identity, rooted in Islamic solidarity and rejection of colonial boundaries. This foundational clash generates existential threat perception regardless of material capabilities.

The second hypothesis is supported by evidence that this conflict is sustained by a path-dependent logic of enmity.

The Durand Line functions as a constitutive symbol through which historical grievances reproduce mutual suspicion, and the cycle of TTP attacks and border retaliation demonstrates that self-defense by one party is repeatedly perceived as an attack by the other. The post-2021 period represents continuity, not discontinuity, conditioned by path dependence and compounded by contemporary security anxieties. The conflict is not motivated only by material threats but by historical memories, identity narratives, domestic politics, and non-state actors. These perception-based insecurities explain why the security dilemma remains persistent and point toward practical strategies for stabilization and long-term cooperation.

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Geniřletilmiř zet

Bu alıřma, ABD'nin ekilmesinin ardından 2021'de Taliban'ın yeniden iktidara gelmesiyle Afganistan ve Pakistan arasında devam eden gvenlik rekabetini incelemektedir. Ortak dini, kltrel ve tarihi baėlara raėmen, ikili iliřkiler belirgin bir řekilde bozulmuř, tekrarlayan sınır atıřmaları, karřılıklı sulamalar ve derinleřen gvensizlik ile karakterize olmuřtur. Bu makale  temel soruyu ele almaktadır: Bu iki komřu lke, ortak ynlerine raėmen neden birbirlerini gvenlik tehdidi olarak grmeye devam ediyor? Gncel gerilimler, zellikle zlmemiř Durand Hattı anlařmazlıėı olmak zere, kolonyal dnem mirasından ne lde kaynaklanıyor? Sınır tesi militan faaliyetler, zellikle Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) tarafından yrtlenler, korku ve misilleme dngsn nasıl pekiřtirdi? Bu sorular nemlidir, nk Afganistan-Pakistan iliřkileri g politikası mereėinden geniř apta incelenirken, algı ve yanlıř yorumlamaların bařlıca atıřma faktrleri olduėu gvenlik ikilemi erevesi aracılıėıyla 2021 sonrası dneme sınırlı ilgi gsterilmiřtir.

alıřma, Booth ve Wheeler (2008), Jervis (1978) ve Wendt (1992) tarafından yapılan alıřmalardan yararlanarak tarihsel-yapılandırmacı gvenlik ikilemi yaklařımını kullanmaktadır. Bu ereve, gvensizliėin yalnızca maddi askeri yeteneklerden deėil, sosyal olarak inřa edilmiř algılardan, tarihsel hatıralardan ve kimlik anlatılarından kaynaklandıėını varsaymaktadır. Bir devletin aldıėı savunma nlemleri —sınır itleri veya terrle mcadele operasyonları gibi— diėer devlet tarafından saldırgan ve dřmanca olarak yorumlanarak gvensizlik sarmalına yol amaktadır. Bu ereve, smrge tarihi, tartıřmalı ulusal kimlikler ve ulustesi militan aėların i ve dıř gvenlik arasındaki sınırı bulanıklařtırdıėı Afganistan-Pakistan baėlamına zellikle uygundur. Metodolojik olarak, makale niteliksel vaka alıřması analizini kullanarak 2021'den 2025'e kadar resmi belgeleri, hkmet yayınlarını, dřnce kuruluřu raporlarını, akademik literatr ve haber medyasını incelemektedir. Sınır tesi militan faaliyetlerin karřılıklı gvensizliėi artırdıėı ve gvenlik ikileminin sarmal dinamiklerini pekiřtirdiėi hipotezini test etmektedir.

Afganistan ve Pakistan arasındaki güvenlik ikilemi, yola bağlı tarihsel miraslara atıfta bulunulmadan anlaşılamaz. 1893 yılında Britanya Hindistanı ile Afganistan arasında sömürge sınırı olarak kurulan Durand Hattı, temelde tartışmalı olmaya devam etmektedir. Pakistan, bu hattı uluslararası alanda tanınan ve miras yoluyla devralınan bir sınır olarak görürken, Afganistan ise bu hattın dayatıldığını savunarak sürekli olarak reddetmiştir. Taliban'ın iktidara geri dönmesi stratejik manzarayı kökten değiştirdi. Tarihsel olarak stratejik derinlik aracı olarak Taliban ile bağlarını sürdüren Pakistanın iş birliğine dayalı ilişkiler bekliyordu. Bunun yerine, ikili gerilimler keskin bir şekilde tırmandı. 2021'den 2025'e kadar olan döneme ait ampirik veriler net bir örüntü ortaya koymaktadır: Pakistan içindeki TTP saldırılarındaki artışların ardından, Pakistan sınır boyunca hava saldırıları, topçu ateşi ve Torkham ve Chaman'daki geçiş noktalarının kapatılması gibi misilleme eylemleri gelmektedir. Pakistan'ın Afganistan topraklarındaki militan sığınaklarına karşı meşru müdafaa olarak sunduğu bu eylemler, Afganistan tarafından egemenliğin ihlali ve orantısız ceza olarak algılanmaktadır. Afganistan, Pakistan'ın siyasi asimetriler, sınır bölgelerinin az gelişmişliği ve militan ağlara karşı tarihsel hoşgörüden kaynaklanan iç sorunlarını dışsallaştırmak için Afganistan'ın sorumluluğunu abarttığını savunuyor. TTP gibi grupların ulusötesi niteliği, hesap verebilirliğin sürekli olarak dağınık olması anlamına geliyor ve bu da her iki devletin de iç denetimi saptırarak birbirini suçlamasına olanak tanıyor.

Bu ikilemi daha da karmaşık hale getiren ise Afganistan'ın 2021 sonrası diplomatik çeşitlendirme politikası, özellikle de Hindistan ile ilişkilerinin derinleşmesidir. 2025 yılında Hindistan, Kabil'deki Teknik Misyonunu tam teşekküllü bir büyükelçiliğe yükseltti. Afganistan bu adımı, ekonomik ortaklıkların pragmatik çeşitlendirilmesi ve Pakistan'a bağımlılığın azaltılması olarak değerlendiriyor. Ancak Pakistan, bu adımı, tarihsel kökenli kuşatılma korkusu ve batı sınırlarında Hindistan'ın etkisinin artması olarak yorumluyor. Güvenlik ikileminin mantığı burada tam olarak işliyor: aynı davranışlar, önceden var olan tehdit algılarına bağlı olarak zıt yorumlara yol açıyor. Afganistan, Pakistan'a karşı

ittifak değil, özerklik peşinde, ancak Pakistan normal diplomasiyi stratejik düşmanlık olarak yorumluyor.

Ampirik kanıtlar, sınır ötesi militan faaliyetlerin karşılıklı güvensizliği tetiklediği ve pekiştirdiği, böylece güvenlik ikilemini sürdürdüğü hipotezini desteklemektedir. Önemli olan, çatışmanın dini veya medeniyet farklılıklarına atfedilemeyeceğidir — Pakistan ve Afganistan dini kimlik, kültürel benzerlikler ve kapsamlı sosyal bağlantılar paylaşmaktadır. Bu ortak noktaların güven yaratamamış olması, jeopolitik, bölgesel ve algıya dayalı faktörlerin önceliğini vurgulamaktadır. Gerilimin azaltılması için sembolik pozisyonların ötesine geçilmesi gerekmektedir. Her iki devlet de Durand Hattı konusundaki yasal tutumundan vazgeçmeyecektir, ancak sınır yönetimi, olay önleme mekanizmaları ve sivil ticaretin korunması konusunda pratik iş birliği sürtüşmeleri azaltılabilir. Her iki taraf da militanlığı devlet politikasının bir aracı olarak değil, ortak bir düşman olarak kabul etmelidir. Afganistan'ın diplomatik çeşitliliği güvenlikleştirilmek yerine normalleştirilmeli ve sınır bölgeleri, düzenlenmiş ticaret ve altyapı yatırımları yoluyla iş birliği bölgeleri olarak yeniden yapılandırılmalıdır.

Afganistan-Pakistan güvenlik ikilemi, her iki devletin de birbirlerini tarihsel olarak şartlanmış korku merceğinden gördükleri için devam etmektedir. Savunma önlemleri sürekli olarak saldırı niyeti olarak yanlış yorumlanmaktadır; normal diplomasi düşmanca bir ittifak olarak yorumlanmaktadır ve ulusötesi militanlık sonsuz suçlamalara yol açmaktadır. Sürdürülebilir güven artırıcı önlemler, iş birliğine dayalı sınır yönetimi ve ortak zayıflıkların kabulü olmadan, diplomatik çabalar ne olursa olsun güvensizlik sarmalı devam edecektir. Bu çalışma, güvenlik analizlerinde genellikle marjinalleştirilen Afgan bakış açılarını merkeze alarak, militan faaliyet modellerine ilişkin ampirik kanıtları entegre ederek ve Güney Asya'nın en çözümsüz ikili ilişkilerinden birinde güvenlik ikilemi çerçevesinin devam eden açıklayıcı gücünü göstererek literatüre katkıda bulunmaktadır.