

PAKISTAN AND AFGHANISTAN REAFFIRM COMMITMENT TO STRENGTHENING BILATERAL TIES

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Pakistan and Afghanistan have reaffirmed their resolve to deepen bilateral relations through enhanced cooperation in key sectors including security, trade, transit, and regional connectivity. ¹

This renewed commitment was underscored during the visit of Pakistan's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, Ishaq Dar, to Kabul on April 19, 2025, marking the first high-level visit by a senior Pakistani official to Afghanistan since February 2023.² The visit marked a continuation of a series of high-level engagements between the two neighbors, reflecting a positive trajectory in bilateral relations in recent weeks.

Notably, a Pakistani delegation led by Ambassador Muhammad Sadiq held substantive talks in Kabul in March 2025, while a delegation from Afghanistan headed by its Acting Minister of Commerce visited Islamabad in April. These reciprocal visits are aimed at fostering mutual trust and cultivating a conducive environment for sustainable and peaceful ties. This was followed by the Trilateral dialogue between Special Envoys of Pakistan, China and Afghanistan, held in Kabul on May 11, between Pakistan's Special Representative Muhammad Sadiq, Yue Xiaoyong, China's Special Envoy, and Afghan Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani in Kabul.³

¹ "Pakistan, Afghanistan agree to boost bilateral co-operation", Express Tribune, April 19, 2025, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2540923/deputy-pm-dar-arrives-in-kabul-for-talks-with-taliban-officials>

² Ibid.

³ Tahir Khan, "Trilateral dialogue: Afghan Taliban govt seeks constructive engagement with Pakistan, China", Express Tribune, May 11, 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1910314>

This was followed by a key trilateral foreign ministers' meeting in Beijing on May 21, 2025. The meeting, the first since May 2023, focused on deepening regional cooperation, building trust, and advancing a shared strategic vision. The trilateral platform remains a crucial mechanism for promoting peace, stability, and development in the region.

During the trilateral, all three parties reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening coordination and communication to realize the potential of regional connectivity. They also expressed their commitment to oppose all forms of terrorism, carry out law enforcement and security cooperation, jointly combat terrorist forces of concern to each side, and stay vigilant against external interference in the internal affairs of regional countries. Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar reiterated Pakistan's commitment to cultivating a close and cooperative partnership with Afghanistan, with a particular emphasis on trade, transit, healthcare collaboration, and infrastructure connectivity. Both Pakistan and China expressed support for extending the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) into Afghanistan under the broader umbrella of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This expansion is seen as a pivotal step toward regional integration and economic growth. China also reaffirmed its backing for both Pakistan and Afghanistan in safeguarding their sovereignty, territorial integrity, and national dignity, underscoring the importance of mutual respect and peaceful coexistence as cornerstones of regional diplomacy.

Together, these advances highlight a growing regional consensus on the need for inclusive dialogue, strategic cooperation, and long-term engagement to ensure lasting peace and prosperity in South and Central Asia. In continuation of the much needed positive momentum between Pakistan and Afghanistan, Islamabad announced the elevation of its charge d'affaires stationed in Kabul to the rank of ambassador. This move was reciprocated by Kabul, which also announced the upgradation of its representative in Pakistan to the rank of Ambassador.

These welcome developments come at a critical juncture in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, which had been marked by instability and mutual mistrust in recent months. The bilateral relationship had been deteriorating, largely attributed to a surge in cross-border terrorist attacks carried out by the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) operating from Afghanistan. TTP's actions have significantly undermined Pakistan's security calculus and fuelled apprehensions regarding Afghanistan's role in counter-terrorism cooperation. In addition to the resurgence of militancy, recurrent skirmishes along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border further accentuated bilateral tensions. However, in a significant development, a senior Taliban commander, Saeedullah Saeed, recently issued a stern warning to militant factions against engaging in unauthorized jihad, particularly targeting Pakistan. He emphasized that such actions are not only in violation of the directives of the Islamic Emirate's

leadership but also contravene Shariah principles. Commander Saeed further clarified that the IEA has explicitly prohibited any unauthorized cross-border activity into Pakistan, stating that such acts constitute an act of disobedience to the central command.⁴

The Pakistan-Afghanistan relationship must, therefore, be built on mutual respect, non-interference, and shared interests—particularly in the areas of security cooperation, economic integration, and connectivity. By insulating bilateral engagement from extraneous rivalries, both nations can ensure that their relationship is defined by constructive collaboration rather than external contention. Moreover, it is imperative that Pakistan and Afghanistan pursue a comprehensive and independent framework for engagement, ideally one that is free from the influence of external regional tensions.

With escalating geopolitical tensions, economic pressures, and an ongoing energy crisis affecting many countries in the region, there is a pressing need to foster deeper regional integration, strengthen economic and energy linkages, and prioritize cooperation over competition. In this context, strengthening cooperation between Central and South Asia is not just desirable it is now absolutely critical.

For Pakistan, the realization of its regional vision is contingent upon meaningful and sustained cooperation with Afghanistan. Conversely, Afghanistan's prospects for political stability and economic development are inextricably linked to constructive engagement with Pakistan. The connectivity between the two countries transcends bilateral interests; it represents a strategic corridor linking South Asia with Central Asia and serves as a cornerstone for long-term regional peace and economic integration. For Afghanistan, trade is both essential and a lifeline. For Pakistan, ensuring security remains a strategic imperative. Although trade and security are often viewed as distinct domains, they must not be viewed in isolation as they are deeply intertwined. Economic activity cannot thrive in the absence of security, and enduring security is unlikely without the generation of economic opportunities and the cultivation of mutual interdependence. Thus, an integrated approach that simultaneously addresses both dimensions is essential. Additionally, while all regional trade routes and infrastructure projects whether through Iran, Central Asia, or the Arabian Sea should be welcomed as complementary rather than competitive, a degree of strategic pragmatism is necessary. The transit corridor through Pakistan remains the shortest, most accessible, and cost-effective route for Afghanistan's trade and connectivity with global markets. Therefore, regardless of political considerations, the Pakistan-Afghanistan transit route must be prioritized and developed as a strategic asset for both countries and the wider region.

⁴ "Afghan Taliban tell 'Khawarij': Carrying out attacks in Pakistan is not jihad", Express Tribune, May 28, 2025, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2548244/afghan-taliban-warn-khawarij-against-violent-attacks-in-pakistan>

So, what needs to be done?

1. A Comprehensive Bilateral Framework (CBF)

There is an urgent need for a Comprehensive Bilateral Framework (CBF) that governs and systematically addresses all aspects of the Pakistan-Afghanistan relationship. A CBF would play a pivotal role in institutionalizing cooperation and preventing unilateral actions, ensuring that decisions affecting both nations are made through dialogue and mutual understanding. Historically, interactions between the two countries have been episodic and reactive, often shaped by security crises rather than long-term strategic planning. To move beyond this pattern, a structured and institutionalized approach is essential. A potential model for such cooperation can be found in the Afghanistan-Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity (APAPPS), launched in 2018, which aimed to institutionalize engagement through working groups on political, military, intelligence, and economic issues. Furthermore, both countries could also consider revisiting the 'Strategic Partnership Agreement,' initially considered in late November 2012 as a framework for long-term cooperation in areas such as security, economic development, and regional connectivity. While APAPPS endured for a while the 'Strategic Partnership Agreement' did not materialize due to political tensions. The current geopolitical context presents a crucial opportunity and need to revisit and reinvigorate these useful frameworks. Now is the time for both countries to demonstrate renewed commitment toward institutionalized cooperation, addressing long-standing challenges through constructive dialogue and mutually-beneficial agreements.

2. De-politicize and De-securitize Trade

For too long, trade between Pakistan and Afghanistan has been held hostage to political tensions. Unilateral measures, such as arbitrary border closures, have inflicted significant economic harm on both countries. To break this cycle, trade must be de-politicized and de-securitized. Policymakers on both sides need to recognize the intrinsic and symbiotic relationship between security and economic development. Despite considerable challenges, Afghanistan's current leadership, albeit de facto, appears to recognize the strategic importance of regional economic integration. Faced with limited international recognition, financial constraints, and internal pressures, the regime's political survival is increasingly tied to economic stability and external connectivity. This pragmatic understanding creates a window of opportunity for constructive engagement, particularly in areas such as trade, infrastructure, and transit cooperation, where mutual interests can serve as the foundation for dialogue and incremental progress. Therefore, the path forward lies in establishing robust bilateral frameworks for connectivity and trade that foster genuine economic interdependence. Hence, initiatives focused on generating employment, especially in border regions, can reduce the appeal of

extremist groups by providing viable economic alternatives, thereby strengthening local communities. Promoting economic interdependence significantly lowers the risk of conflict, as mutual interests create strong incentives for cooperation and peace. To achieve this, emphasis should be placed on effective border management, modernization of key border crossings, facilitating the smooth movement of people and goods, and upgrading the Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA) to enhance trade facilitation and economic integration.

3. Develop Cross-Border Economic Zones Inspired by Termez

Historically, indigenous and privately-led border markets have operated along the Pakistan-Afghanistan borders, serving as informal yet vital nodes of economic activity and cross-border exchanges. However, these markets have not been fully developed or integrated into formal economic planning, limiting their potential to contribute meaningfully to regional trade and livelihoods. In contrast, Uzbekistan's Airtom Economic Zone in Termez presents a successful model of structured cross-border trade facilitation. This zone offers a replicable blueprint for the broader South and Central Asian region, demonstrating how well-designed infrastructure, policy coherence, and public-private partnerships can transform border regions into engines of economic growth. In the absence of sustained political will, the private sector assumes an increasingly vital role in advancing regional integration. Functional economic zones, such as Termez, illustrate how targeted investment and private initiative can complement broader connectivity efforts and create tangible economic linkages across borders. Therefore, Airtom serves as a compelling model for Pakistan and Afghanistan. It underscores how properly planned, strategically located, and efficiently managed cross-border economic zones can facilitate trade, attract investment, and promote regional connectivity—even in complex geopolitical environments. Hence to replicate such models, both Islamabad and Kabul must exhibit genuine political will and commitment to implementation. Yet, it is equally important to acknowledge that entrenched interests on both sides often benefit from outdated, informal, and inefficient trade arrangements. Breaking through this inertia will require bold leadership and inclusive economic planning that incorporates border communities and private-sector stakeholders. Initial efforts could be concentrated bilaterally at key border crossings such as Torkham and Chaman, which can serve as pilot sites for integrated border economic zones. These efforts should also be pursued within the trilateral frameworks, such as Pakistan-Afghanistan-Uzbekistan trilateral or cooperation under the transformative China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The importance of regional connectivity was reiterated during the trilateral dialogue in Beijing, where all parties emphasized extending CPEC into Afghanistan as a strategic objective. Afghanistan, geographically positioned at the crossroads of South and Central Asia, has the potential to serve as a critical transit and trade hub, linking CPEC

with the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor. Realizing this vision will not only enhance regional economic integration but also contribute to long-term stability and shared prosperity across the region.

4. Utilize Existing Trilateral Platforms

Both Pakistan and Afghanistan must make use of existing trilateral platforms to advance shared economic and strategic interests. There is considerable untapped potential in trilateral formats such as China-Pakistan-Afghanistan, Afghanistan-Iran-Pakistan, Pakistan-China-Russia, Pakistan-Afghanistan-Uzbekistan, and Pakistan-Afghanistan-Türkiye to name a few. These mechanisms offer valuable avenues for launching small-scale, practical initiatives in trade, energy, and regional connectivity. Such projects can serve as important confidence-building measures gradually fostering trust and setting the stage for more ambitious, long-term cooperation. Through these mechanisms, mutual economic stakes increase, which reduce the likelihood of conflict and expand incentives for cooperation. In this way, trilateral platforms can evolve from diplomatic forums into vehicles for shared development and regional integration.

5. Strengthen Regional Framework for Engagement with Afghanistan

Despite past differences and strategic divergences, there is growing recognition and strong consensus among Afghanistan's immediate neighbours regarding the need for sustainable peace and stability in the country. This convergence of perspectives stems from shared concerns, including cross-border terrorism, refugee flows, narcotics trafficking, and the risks of regional instability. However, despite this alignment of interests, an active coordinated regional framework through which the broader region can engage with Afghanistan collectively is dormant. Instead, the current approach is fragmented and compartmentalized. Given the transnational nature of the challenges emanating from Afghanistan, it is imperative to activate a comprehensive regional framework that enables coordinated engagement with the Afghan authorities across multiple domains—politics, security, trade, humanitarian assistance, and infrastructure. In the immediate aftermath of transition in Afghanistan in August 2021, the Regional platform of Afghanistan's immediate neighbours—including Pakistan, China, Iran, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan was established. It had several interactions at the SR and FM levels. Reinvigoration of this mechanism would not only enhance the effectiveness of regional responses but also increase pressure on the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) to act responsibly and view individual countries' concerns as shared regional priorities.

In this context, the revival of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Contact Group on Afghanistan could also be another possibility. The SCO, which includes key regional stakeholders such as China, Russia, Pakistan, Iran, and the Central Asian republics, offers another existing institutional platform that could be adapted to coordinate regional policy, foster dialogue, and channel collective engagement. A revitalized SCO Contact Group, with a clearly defined mandate, could also help develop a broader regional arrangement that reinforces stability, connectivity, and sustainable development in and around Afghanistan.

By developing a comprehensive bilateral framework, de-politicizing trade, establishing cross-border economic zones, leveraging existing trilateral platforms, and strengthening a regional engagement mechanisms, both Pakistan and Afghanistan can lay the foundation for a resilient, forward-looking relationship. These steps not only address bilateral challenges but also pave the way for deeper regional integration, enhanced economic interdependence, and sustainable peace. At a time of growing uncertainty and shifting geopolitical alignments, this structured approach offers both countries a strategic pathway toward mutual prosperity and regional stability.