

FROM STRATEGIC PATIENCE TO STATE RESPONSIBILITY: RETHINKING PAKISTAN'S ENGAGEMENT WITH TALIBAN-LED AFGHANISTAN

By
Dr Amina Khan
Director

Centre for Afghanistan, Middle East & Africa (CAMEA), ISSI
Email: aminakhan@issi.org.pk

October 16, 2026

*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do
not represent those of ISSI)*



Introduction

The return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan on 15 August 2021 after the exit of the US forces brought a certain degree of calm and stability to the country. However, after five years of rule, there are many concerns that still persist over the absence of a constitutional framework, limited political inclusivity, restrictions on the rights of women and girls, human rights issues, and pivotal questions surrounding the counterterrorism commitments which they gave under the Doha Agreement.

These gaps between the Taliban's stated policies and their implementation continue to raise serious doubts regarding their willingness and capacity to translate assurances into sustained action, placing the future stability of Afghanistan and the wider region at serious risk. It is important for the Afghan Taliban to recognize that they are no longer an insurgency, but the ruling entity, albeit de facto, in Afghanistan, which entails obligations and responsibilities that extend beyond those of an insurgent movement.

More importantly, Afghanistan's challenges increasingly transcend its borders, with Pakistan among the countries most directly affected by the country's evolving security, political, and economic dynamics. Against this background, addressing Pakistan-Afghanistan bilateral ties is inherently complex, as the relationship is shaped by a unique combination of historical legacies, geographic realities, security imperatives, economic interdependence, and evolving regional geopolitics. These

factors make it one of the region's most sensitive and deeply intertwined bilateral relationships, where developments on one side of the border inevitably have consequences for the other.

The root of the strained relations lies in unresolved historical bilateral irritants, primarily revolving around Afghanistan's position on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, competing strategic expectations, and divergent approaches to counter-terrorism. More fundamentally, bilateral relations have too often been viewed through a narrow security prism, leading to the limited nature of ties. As a consequence, other contours of the bilateral relationship have failed to evolve, and prevented the institutionalization of a broader framework for managing differences.

This institutional deficit is perhaps one of the most important weaknesses in the relationship, as no comprehensive and effective mechanism is in place which could be activated in times of tension. Consequently, when relations deteriorate, unilateral measures, border closures, restrictions on movement and trade, expulsions and military action often replace sustained institutional engagement. Such measures may provide short-term leverage, but also impose significant costs on both sides. Unfortunately, the current state of relations is a continuation of this pattern.

Taliban Takeover - Initial Engagement

After the return of the Afghan Taliban to power in August 2021, there were hopes of a more stable relationship. However, soon the differences started to emerge. The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) was in particular the central source of bilateral friction and a major national security threat to Pakistan.

Since November 2022, the TTP has been operating from Afghanistan, sadly enjoying the tacit support and patronage of the Afghan Taliban. The TTP has been responsible for an unprecedented increase in terrorist and cross-border attacks inside Pakistan. For the first six months of 2026 alone, Pakistan reported 3,145 such incidents, resulting in approximately 850 deaths. The seriousness of the threat has also been highlighted by successive UN Security Council Monitoring Team reports. These reports have noted that the TTP constitutes the largest component of foreign terrorist fighters operating in Afghanistan, with several thousand members, and that the group has become increasingly emboldened, gaining greater momentum, ideological confidence, and material strength. Additionally, the TTP was accorded greater liberty and support from the de facto authorities in Kabul, and consequently, TTP attacks against Pakistan increased, amplifying regional tensions.

The sharp rise in terrorist attacks, coupled with recurring clashes along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, has pushed bilateral relations into an uncertain phase. Tensions reached a critical point in

October 2025, moving beyond diplomatic friction to periodic border clashes, bringing the two countries into direct military confrontation leading to the closure of major crossing points along the border. The deteriorating security environment has further deepened mistrust and complicated diplomatic engagement, ultimately prompting Pakistan to launch Operation Ghazab lil-Haq (targeted campaign against TTP, support structures, logistics and associated infrastructure within KP and Baluchistan and TTP hideouts in Afghanistan) in February 2026 as a measure of last resort.

Evolution of Pakistan's Position

It is important to understand that Pakistan's decision to resort to military action did not occur in isolation. Following the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, Pakistan pursued a clear strategic and economic interest in a stable and peaceful Afghanistan. Islamabad was therefore among the few countries at the forefront of engagement with the new Afghan dispensation. It facilitated evacuations, encouraged greater regional and international engagement with Kabul, maintained high-level contacts, and pursued measures aimed at facilitating bilateral trade and transit. Within the broader context, Islamabad exercised nearly four years of strategic patience, repeatedly seeking to address the TTP challenge through bilateral engagement, diplomatic pressure, regional mechanisms, economic incentives, and third-party facilitation.

This engagement took place at multiple political and security levels. In November 2022, then Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Hina Rabbani Khar visited Kabul for high-level consultations with the Afghan interim authorities, while in February 2023, a senior delegation led by Defence Minister Khawaja Muhammad Asif travelled to Kabul specifically to discuss the growing threat posed by the TTP and other terrorist groups. These efforts intensified in 2025. Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Senator Mohammad Ishaq Dar undertook repeated visits to Kabul, including in April, July and August, engaging the senior Afghan leadership on security, trade, transit, regional connectivity and bilateral relations.

Pakistan simultaneously pursued regional diplomatic tracks such as the China-Pakistan-Afghanistan trilateral process, which has convened multiple sessions since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, where counterterrorism cooperation featured alongside trade, connectivity and regional stability. Pakistan also continued to promote Afghanistan's regional economic integration, including through the Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan railway framework signed in Kabul in July 2025. Even after relations deteriorated sharply in October 2025, Islamabad continued to pursue a negotiated outcome. Pakistan participated in successive rounds of talks with the Afghan authorities in Doha, Istanbul and Urumqi, facilitated by Qatar Turkiye, and China with discussions focusing on cross-border terrorism and the establishment of a concrete and verifiable mechanism to address

Pakistan's security concerns. These successive bilateral, trilateral and third-party initiatives demonstrate that the military action was preceded by a sustained diplomatic effort to seek a negotiated and institutional solution to the security challenge.

The Afghan Taliban have frequently characterized Pakistan's current policy as an effort to destabilize Afghanistan. However, since August 2021, Pakistan has demonstrated a continued preference for engagement and cooperation rather than isolation, maintaining high-level bilateral diplomatic and economic engagement while also encouraging greater regional and international engagement with Kabul. A testament to this approach is the expansion of bilateral trade and transit during this period. In 2022, Pakistan's imports from Afghanistan increased to more than \$700 million, compared with approximately \$550 million in 2021. Similarly, during the same period, Pakistani exports to Central Asia transiting through Afghanistan increased by 70 percent, rising from \$118 million in 2021 to \$202 million in 2022. These figures illustrate Pakistan's sustained efforts to maintain and expand economic engagement with Afghanistan, even as security concerns increasingly came to the fore.

TTP Problem

Now let us look at the Afghan Taliban position on TTP, which is the main irritant at the moment. The Afghan Taliban have consistently denied the presence of the TTP in Afghanistan, as well as providing the group with any support. However, the developments on the ground suggest a more complex reality.

The relationship between the Afghan Taliban and the TTP cannot be simply dismissed. The TTP draws ideological inspiration from the Afghan Taliban, and their relationship overtime have translated into a more political alignment. Most notably, following the Afghan Taliban's return to power in Kabul, they facilitated negotiations between the Pakistani government and the TTP, contributing to a ceasefire that lasted from June to November 2022. The Afghan Taliban also repeatedly offered to mediate between the two sides and proposed relocating TTP elements away from the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. This clearly validates the presence of the TTP in Afghanistan, but also the leverage the Afghan Taliban have over the TTP.

A deeper look at TTP would reveal that it may idealize the Afghan Taliban, but unlike them, they are not a monolith, nor religious. In fact, the TTP is an amalgamation of 27 criminal entities which have been using terrorism for personal agendas.

Since its inception in 2007, TTP's goalposts have consistently changed. Initially, the TTP framed its conflict with the Pakistani state largely in the context of Pakistan's participation in the U.S.-led "War

on Terror.” It subsequently started demanding the imposition of its own interpretation of Shariah in the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). After the group was eventually weakened and displaced from much of its operational space following Pakistan's military operations, particularly Operation Zarb-e-Azb in 2014, its demands have included the reversal of the merger of FATA with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. And now its current military campaign across Pakistan is in the defense of the Afghan Taliban with TTP leader Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud and key factions, including the Hafiz Gul Bahadur group, Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (JuA), and Ittehad-ul-Mujahideen Pakistan (IMP) announcing plans to expand attacks across Pakistan.

In contrast to the Afghan Taliban, who fought against foreign military presence, the TTP is not fighting an occupying or foreign force but is engaged in a bloody campaign against the Pakistani state and fellow Pakistanis. Its attacks have targeted civilians, security personnel, and religious sites, raising serious questions about the group's professed commitment to Islamic principles. The recent attack on Friday worshippers at a mosque in Kohat, for instance, further illustrates the grave human cost of the TTP's campaign and the contradiction between such violence and the religious principles that the group claims to uphold.

TTP's extremist and violent attacks also raise a fundamental question about the Afghan Taliban's own stated religious principles. If, as the Taliban maintain, that they do not support the killing of fellow Muslims or innocent civilians, how can they justify or tolerate the presence of a group that has repeatedly targeted them? The contradiction between these stated principles and the continued presence and activities of the TTP presents a question that the Afghan Taliban must address.

Afghan Taliban-TTP Alignment: From Ideological Solidarity to State Responsibility

It appears that the Afghan Taliban have adopted a compartmentalized approach towards fulfilling their counterterrorism commitments under the Doha framework. While they have taken sustained action against Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), they have not dealt with the TTP threat with the same degree of resolve to most of the time citing their lack of capacity to do so. Seeing this contradiction, Pakistan is justified in questioning the Afghan Taliban's willingness to address the TTP challenge, particularly given the group's continued presence and activities from Afghan territory.

It is important to emphasize here that Pakistan's security concerns should not be viewed simply as a bilateral demand or as a request for special concessions from the Afghan Taliban. From Pakistan's perspective, Islamabad is seeking the implementation of counterterrorism commitments that the Taliban agreed to under the Doha framework, particularly the assurance that Afghan territory would

not be used to threaten other countries. The issue, therefore, extends beyond Pakistan-Afghanistan bilateral relations and touches upon wider regional and international counterterrorism obligations.

The issues confronting Afghanistan today from terrorism, weak economic integration, refugee movements, narcotics trafficking, and inadequate trade and transit connectivity, do not simply have direct implications for Pakistan only, but they also impact the wider region. The post-2021 security environment has witnessed the emergence of increasingly interconnected and transnational terrorist networks across Afghanistan and the wider region. Groups such as the TTP, Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), Al Qaeda, Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), and the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), despite significant ideological and organisational differences, have demonstrated varying degrees of tactical convergence and operational interaction. This evolving ecosystem facilitates the sharing of tactics, recruitment networks, weapons and financing channels, training, technology, propaganda, and operational expertise. The diffusion of tactics, including the increasing use of female suicide bombers, a phenomenon alien to this part of the world, illustrates how operational practices can transcend individual organisational boundaries. The threat, therefore, cannot be understood solely through a Pakistan-centric lens; it increasingly constitutes a broader regional and transnational security challenge, with implications extending from Afghanistan and Pakistan to and beyond.

Moreover, concerns regarding a selective or compartmentalized approach by the Afghan Taliban towards counterterrorism are not also confined to Pakistan. Similar concerns have been raised by China regarding the presence and activities of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) in Afghanistan, and has pressed the Afghan Taliban to take action against the group. Russia, despite being the first country to formally recognize the Afghan Taliban government, has likewise acknowledged the presence of multiple terrorist organizations operating from Afghan territory. These concerns point to a broader regional challenge surrounding Afghanistan's ability and willingness to prevent its territory from being used by transnational terrorist organisations.

Additionally, the issue should not be seen as Pakistan's immediate security concern only. While the TTP may appear to be primarily a Pakistani problem, the continued tolerance of the group's presence will eventually pose a challenge to the Afghan Taliban themselves. Over time, the TTP's ideological ambitions and operational interests will come into conflict with those of the Afghan authorities, creating a security challenge that extends beyond the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. At the same time, prolonged tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan primarily benefits the TTP. Continued deterioration in bilateral relations continues to provide the groups with greater space to

exploit political divisions, recruit, mobilize, and expand their operational networks. This makes sustained Pakistan-Afghanistan dialogue increasingly important to regional security.

During the insurgency, Taliban relations with TTP and other militant groups had a different logic. This existed within the context of an armed struggle against a foreign military presence and the Afghan government. But now Taliban's political position has fundamentally changed. They are now defacto governing authority of Afghanistan. This entails certain responsibilities: internal security, preventing armed groups from using Afghan territory against other states, international obligations, and pursuit of economic and diplomatic relations.

More often, the Afghan Taliban have shown reluctance to take decisive action against the TTP out of concern that doing so could provoke the group to turn against them or drive it closer to the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP). This is a risk that they would have to confront sooner than later. Continued accommodation of the TTP would allow the group to further strengthen its capabilities, alliances, and operational reach. The strategic question before Kabul, therefore, is whether continued accommodation offers a sustainable solution or merely postpones a confrontation that may become more difficult to manage in the future. At its core, this is a choice between competing strategic interests: the pursuit of a stable and constructive relationship with Pakistan, with its significant security, economic, and regional implications, or to continue accommodating a militant group whose presence could eventually pose a challenge to Afghanistan's own stability.

While the unprecedented level of violence has understandably generated considerable anger and frustration within Pakistan, the way forward requires a calibrated approach that combines security measures with sustained diplomatic engagement, economic leverage, and improved border management. Over-reliance on force has demonstrated limitations; what is required is a broader strategy that addresses both the security threat and the underlying drivers of instability. Both Pakistan and Afghanistan have to recognize the strategic importance of their bilateral relationship, and reach an understanding where core concerns of both parties are understood and accommodated. Pakistan's fundamental concern, cross-border attacks, and Afghanistan's interests of border trade and connectivity are deeply interconnected. There can be no sustainable trade and economic activity without security, just as lasting security cannot be achieved without creating economic opportunities and livelihoods for people on both sides of the border.

There is therefore an urgent need to develop a comprehensive bilateral framework through which both can engage on all contours of their bilateral ties. Previous efforts, including the work undertaken through the 2012 'Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) bilateral framework and subsequently through the Afghanistan-Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity (APAPPS) in

2018 provide useful precedents for such an approach. A revived and more comprehensive framework could provide both sides with institutionalized channels for dialogue and crisis management, allowing them to address disagreements through established mechanisms.

In this context, the immediate revival of the high-level bilateral engagement and convening the Joint Coordination Committee (JCC) could be explored. A functioning JCC could provide an important platform for restoring communication, identifying areas of convergence, and developing a broader framework for managing ties.

Regional and International Dimension

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 missing.

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 Afghan Taliban authorities 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, offering 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. Trilateral mechanisms such as China-Pakistan-Afghanistan (Urumqi Talks) and the facilitation through Uzbekistan-Pakistan-Afghanistan, Qatar and Turkiye should be leveraged to facilitate communication, mediation, and de-escalation between Islamabad and Kabul. There is also merit in returning to the Doha framework. Rather than allowing the agreement to remain largely

one-sided in its implementation, the international community should use the Doha process as a platform for sustained diplomatic engagement and pressure on the Afghan Taliban to fulfil the commitments that remain unimplemented under the framework.

Way Forward

1. Adopt a Policy of Calibrated Engagement

Pakistan should move beyond strategic patience towards a calibrated policy that combines credible security measures with sustained diplomatic engagement. Military action should remain focused on addressing immediate terrorist threats, while diplomatic channels, economic engagement and confidence-building measures are maintained to prevent further deterioration in bilateral relations. At the same time, the Afghan Taliban should be encouraged to recognise their responsibilities as the de facto authorities in Afghanistan and ensure that Afghan territory is not used against Pakistan or other neighbouring states.

2. Institutionalize Bilateral Engagement through a Comprehensive Framework

Pakistan should establish a Comprehensive Bilateral Framework (CBF) to provide a structured and sustained mechanism for managing political, security, economic, trade and connectivity issues. This would reduce reliance on episodic and reactive engagement and would provide institutional channels for addressing disputes before they escalate. The experience of APAPPS and earlier efforts towards a Strategic Partnership Agreement could provide useful lessons.

3. Separate Economic Engagement from Political Disputes

Pakistan should seek to insulate bilateral trade and transit from political and security tensions. Prolonged or abrupt border closures carry economic costs for both countries and risk undermining Pakistan's own connectivity objectives. Greater investment in border infrastructure, digital customs systems, coordinated border management and the modernization of APTTA can help facilitate legitimate movement while addressing security concerns.

4. Turn Border Regions into Areas of Economic Interdependence

Pakistan should explore the establishment of pilot cross-border economic zones at Torkham and Chaman, drawing on the Termez/Airitom model. Such zones could formalize informal trade, generate employment, attract private-sector investment and provide alternative livelihoods for border communities. Economic interdependence should be viewed not merely as a commercial objective but as a component of a broader strategy for reducing instability along the border.

5. Use Regional Partnerships to Share the Burden of Engagement

Pakistan should make greater use of existing trilateral and regional mechanisms, including China-Pakistan-Afghanistan, Pakistan-Afghanistan-Uzbekistan and Pakistan - Afghanistan-Turkiye, to advance practical cooperation in trade, energy, infrastructure and connectivity. A more regionalised approach would also reduce the perception that Afghanistan-Pakistan relations are exclusively bilateral and allow Pakistan to build broader support for addressing common security concerns.

6. Develop a Coordinated Regional Approach towards Afghanistan

Pakistan should advocate a more coherent regional framework involving Afghanistan's immediate neighbours, particularly China, Iran, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. Shared concerns, including terrorism, refugees, narcotics, border security, trade and connectivity- cannot be addressed effectively through bilateral mechanisms alone.

7. Strengthen International Accountability for Doha Commitments

The international community must recognise that the Taliban's emergence as Afghanistan's de facto authorities was preceded by the Doha process, through which they made specific commitments concerning counter-terrorism, political engagement and the future of Afghanistan. These commitments cannot be treated as time-bound or selectively implemented. While engagement with the Taliban remains necessary, it should be accompanied by clear benchmarks and accountability for compliance with the commitments made in Doha and with broader international obligations. If the Taliban seek greater international acceptance and integration, they must demonstrate that they are prepared to act in accordance with international norms and their obligations as the de facto authorities of Afghanistan.

Conclusion

Ultimately, a stable, peaceful, and economically viable Afghanistan serves the interests of the entire region and the wider international community. Afghanistan's history has demonstrated that instability within the country can have consequences far beyond its borders, making its stability a shared regional and international concern. The international community therefore has a collective responsibility to use diplomacy and sustained engagement to encourage the Afghan Taliban to meet their counterterrorism commitments and ensure that Afghan territory is not used against other states. What is required is a coordinated, multi-layered approach in which bilateral, regional, and international platforms complement one another: lead to a purposeful and result- oriented Pakistan-Afghanistan engagement to address bilateral concerns; trilateral mechanisms to facilitate

confidence-building and mediation; regional forums to build collective consensus; and international diplomacy to ensure that broader counterterrorism commitments are upheld.

The resurgence of the TTP and the deterioration of Pakistan–Afghanistan relations present a complex and evolving challenge. Addressing it will require a balanced strategy that combines calibrated security measures with sustained diplomatic engagement, enhanced border management, strengthened local governance and strengthened regional cooperation. Pakistan's approach must prioritize internal stability while pursuing pragmatic engagement with Afghanistan, striking a balance between deterrence and dialogue without compromising its core concerns and territorial integrity. For the Afghan Taliban, the choice is equally critical. They must decide whether to establish mutually beneficial relations with Pakistan and to support a stable, secure, and economically integrated region, or to continue living in the past and appeasing terrorist entities, at the expense of regional peace, their own stability and legitimacy.