



IPS INSIGHTS

Perspectives On the Issues Shaping Policy

Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations: From Strategic Patience to Strategic Recalibration

Dr. Tughrul Yamin¹

(PART-I)

The relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan have never been easy. It has only become more difficult ever since the Taliban returned to power in Kabul in August 2021. What was initially expected to be an opportunity for Pakistan to achieve a more secure western frontier has evolved into a cycle of terrorism, border confrontation, diplomatic mistrust, economic disruption and population displacement.

The central paradox is striking. Pakistan and Afghanistan are bound by geography, history, ethnicity, religion, trade and millions of human relationships. Yet the two states appear increasingly incapable of translating these natural bonds into a stable political relationship.

The recent address by Afghan Ambassador Sardar Ahmad Shakib at Pakistan's National Defence University (NDU) on September 1 provides an interesting window into Kabul's thinking. The very fact that an Afghan diplomatic representative was given an opportunity to address Pakistan's premier institution for strategic and security studies is significant. More importantly, his message suggested that Kabul wants dialogue, but on terms that recognise Afghan sovereignty and reject unilateral Pakistani military action.

The question, therefore, is not simply whether relations can improve. The real question is whether Islamabad and Kabul can develop a new framework for coexistence in which neither side expects the other to surrender its core security interests.

The Relationship Has Moved Beyond Ordinary Diplomatic Friction

For decades, Pakistan's Afghan policy was influenced by the belief that a friendly government in Kabul was essential to Pakistan's western security. The Taliban's return to power appeared, initially, to offer an opportunity to resolve some of the problems that had plagued bilateral relations.

That expectation has not materialized. The principal source of the crisis is now the so-called Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Islamabad maintains that TTP leadership, fighters and infrastructure operate from Afghan territory and that the Afghan Taliban have neither dismantled these sanctuaries nor taken sufficient action against them. Kabul rejects this accusation and argues that TTP is essentially Pakistan's internal problem. As recently as September 1, the Afghan authorities reiterated that Afghan territory would not be used against any country while insisting that TTP should not be treated as an Afghan responsibility. At the same time,

¹ Senior IPS Associate. He can be reached at tughrul@ips.net.pk

reports indicate that informal Pakistan-Afghanistan talks may continue in Kabul.

This disagreement is fundamental because it involves two incompatible definitions of sovereignty. Pakistan's position is that sovereignty entails responsibility: if attacks against Pakistan are planned, organized or launched from Afghan territory, Kabul must act. Afghanistan's position is that sovereignty means Pakistan cannot conduct military operations on Afghan soil merely because it believes militants are present there. Unless this conceptual divide is bridged, periodic negotiations will produce little more than temporary ceasefires.

The Military Option Cannot Become The Permanent Policy.

Pakistan has demonstrated that it possesses the capability to strike targets across the border. But military action, even when tactically successful, cannot by itself solve the TTP problem. Every cross-border strike creates three potential consequences.

First, it risks retaliation and escalation. Second, it strengthens the argument of Afghan nationalists and Taliban leaders that Pakistan is violating Afghan sovereignty. Third, it makes it politically harder for Kabul to cooperate with Islamabad because the Taliban leadership must demonstrate that it cannot be coerced by its neighbor.

Pakistan therefore needs to retain credible military deterrence, but deterrence should support diplomacy rather than replace it. The objective should not be an endless military contest with Kabul. It should be to make the cost of allowing attacks against Pakistan sufficiently high while simultaneously providing the Afghan authorities with a face-saving mechanism to take action against militant groups.

The NDU Lecture: An Opportunity Hidden Inside the Crisis

The Shakib lecture deserves particular attention. The Afghan ambassador reportedly emphasized Afghanistan's geographical, historical, economic and people-to-people links with Pakistan while calling for direct

dialogue and recognition of each other's legitimate security concerns.

This should not be dismissed merely as diplomatic rhetoric; the venue itself matters. NDU is not an ordinary academic institution. It is where Pakistan's military and civilian strategic communities examine national-security issues. Giving the Afghan representative an opportunity to speak directly to this audience provides Kabul with a channel to communicate its thinking to the very people who influence Pakistan's security policy. At the same time, it gives Pakistan an opportunity to hear Kabul's position without the filtering that normally occurs through diplomatic notes and public statements.

There is, however, an important lesson from the controversy surrounding the subsequent dissemination of the lecture. Sensitive strategic dialogue requires confidentiality. If participants believe that candid comments will immediately become material for public political messaging, future dialogue will inevitably become guarded and superficial.

The NDU episode should therefore be treated as an opening, not as a diplomatic embarrassment. Pakistan should consider institutionalizing such interactions, perhaps through discreet Track 1.5 and Track 2 mechanisms involving diplomats, military officers, academics and security experts.

The Economic Relationship is Another Casualty

The economic cost of confrontation is becoming increasingly serious. Pakistan and Afghanistan have considerable potential for bilateral commerce and regional transit. Pakistan's Foreign Ministry identifies Torkham, Chaman, Ghulam Khan, Kharlachi, Badini and Angoor Ada among the principal crossings for bilateral trade. Yet repeated border closures have damaged this potential. Pakistan closed major crossings in October 2025 amid heightened security tensions, severely affecting the movement of perishable goods and other commercial traffic. By August 2026, Afghan trade through Pakistan remained severely disrupted, with prolonged closures encouraging traders to

look increasingly towards alternative routes through Iran and Central Asia.

This is strategically significant. If Afghanistan develops reliable alternatives through Iranian ports, Central Asian corridors and China, Pakistan could gradually lose the geographical advantage that should naturally make it Afghanistan's principal commercial outlet. Geography gives Pakistan an advantage but geography alone does not guarantee economic influence. Connectivity must be accompanied by reliability.

The Refugee Question Has Become a Strategic Liability

The refugee issue is perhaps the most emotionally charged dimension of the relationship. Pakistan has hosted millions of Afghans for decades. Islamabad's argument that undocumented foreigners cannot remain indefinitely is understandable from the perspective of state sovereignty and internal security. But the manner and scale of repatriation also have consequences for Pakistan's image and its relationship with Kabul.

UNHCR/IOM figures indicate that approximately 694,600 Afghans returned from Pakistan during 2026 by August 29, with total Afghan returns from all neighboring countries exceeding 1.18 million during the year. The humanitarian implications are considerable, but there is also a hard security calculation. A policy perceived in Afghanistan as collective punishment can strengthen anti-Pakistan sentiment and make cooperation on counterterrorism more difficult. It can also undermine the influence that Pakistan historically enjoyed among Afghan communities.

Pakistan therefore needs to distinguish between illegal migration, legitimate refugees, genuine security threats and long-established Afghan communities. These categories should not be treated as one. A carefully managed repatriation policy, linked to documentation and humanitarian exemptions, would serve Pakistan's interests better than indiscriminate pressure.

Afghanistan Changing its Strategic Orientation

One reason Pakistan should reconsider its approach is that Afghanistan is no longer as dependent on Pakistan as it once was. Kabul has demonstrated an increasing willingness to engage China, Iran, Russia, Central Asian states and other regional actors. China, in particular, has both economic and strategic reasons to promote stability in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan's search for alternative trade routes is another manifestation of this diversification. Pakistan should therefore avoid creating a situation in which Kabul concludes that its national interests require permanently bypassing Pakistan. The danger is not that Afghanistan will suddenly become a strategic adversary of Pakistan. The greater danger is the gradual emergence of a permanently distrustful Afghanistan supported by a network of alternative regional partners.

China Could Play a Constructive Role but Pakistan Must Lead its Own Diplomacy

China is probably the external actor best placed to facilitate a Pakistan-Afghanistan understanding.

Beijing has relations with both Islamabad and Kabul, has major economic interests in regional connectivity and has security concerns of its own regarding militancy and instability in Afghanistan. Chinese mediation, however, should not become a substitute for direct Pakistan-Afghanistan diplomacy. Islamabad should take the initiative.

A trilateral mechanism involving Pakistan, Afghanistan and China could address three interconnected issues:

1. Counterterrorism and intelligence cooperation;
2. Border management and de-escalation; and
3. Trade, transit and regional connectivity.

Other regional states could subsequently be associated with specific economic or security initiatives.

The foregoing analysis suggests that Pakistan's Afghan policy can no longer be based on either strategic patience or reliance on military pressure alone. The challenge is to develop a policy that protects Pakistan's security interests while recognising Afghanistan's sovereignty and evolving regional relationships. The question, therefore, is no longer whether Pakistan should engage Kabul, but how such engagement can be structured around verifiable security commitments, sustained dialogue, border management and mutually beneficial economic interests. The next part considers the policy choices available to Pakistan and the mechanisms through which a more stable relationship could be pursued.

(PART-II)

What Should Pakistan's Future Policy Look Like?

Pakistan needs a policy that combines deterrence, dialogue, conditional engagement and economic interdependence. The first requirement should be an enforceable counterterrorism understanding. Kabul should be asked to provide verifiable assurances that Afghan territory will not be used for attacks against Pakistan. Pakistan, in return, should provide specific intelligence and evidence through an agreed mechanism rather than relying exclusively on public accusations.

The second requirement is a permanent border-management mechanism. Military commanders and border authorities on both sides should have direct communication channels capable of dealing with incidents before they escalate.

Third, border crossings should not become instruments of routine political pressure. Security concerns may justify temporary restrictions, but prolonged closures damage both countries and encourage alternative trade routes.

Fourth, Pakistan should revive the idea of economic interdependence. Afghanistan's access to Pakistani ports, Pakistani access to Central Asian markets, the TAPI project

and the Trans-Afghan railway can create interests that make conflict progressively more expensive.

Finally, Pakistan should maintain a clear distinction between the Afghan Taliban government and the TTP. The Taliban's ideological and historical affinity with the TTP is a genuine security concern, but Pakistan's objective should be to convince Kabul that the TTP represents a threat to Afghan stability as well as Pakistani security.

Three Possible Futures

The relationship could now move in three directions:

- 1. Continued Confrontation** – Border clashes, militant attacks, diplomatic recriminations and intermittent air operations could become the new normal. This is the easiest trajectory, and probably the most dangerous.
- 2. A Cold Peace** – Neither side resolves its fundamental differences, but both recognise that permanent conflict is too costly. Border management improves, trade gradually resumes and security dialogue continues without a political breakthrough.
- 3. Managed Strategic Coexistence** – Pakistan accepts that Afghanistan will pursue an independent foreign policy and will not become a client state. Afghanistan accepts that its territory cannot be used as a sanctuary for attacks against Pakistan. Both sides then build economic and institutional mechanisms around this understanding.

The third option is difficult, but not impossible.

A Relationship That Cannot Be Escaped

Pakistan and Afghanistan cannot change their geography. They cannot eliminate their shared history. Nor can they simply wish away the social and economic networks that have developed across their common frontier over generations.

The choice before Islamabad and Kabul is therefore not whether they should have

a relationship. They are condemned by geography to have one. The choice is whether that relationship will be hostile or managed. Pakistan must remain uncompromising on terrorism and national security. Afghanistan must understand that the presence of militant organizations capable of attacking Pakistan from Afghan territory cannot be dismissed as an exclusively Pakistani internal matter. At the same time, Pakistan must recognize that Afghanistan will resist any policy that appears to subordinate its sovereignty to Pakistani security requirements.

The way forward is consequently neither appeasement nor perpetual confrontation. It is deterrence backed by diplomacy, sovereignty matched by responsibility, and security complemented by economic interdependence.

The recent NDU interaction may, in retrospect, prove more important than the controversy surrounding it. If Islamabad and Kabul can convert such conversations into a structured and sustained dialogue, the present crisis could become the beginning of a new relationship.

If they cannot, Pakistan and Afghanistan risk becoming trapped in an endless cycle in which every terrorist attack produces a border closure, every border closure produces greater Afghan alienation, every military response produces retaliation, and every retaliation makes the next round of dialogue more difficult.

Breaking that cycle will require political courage on both sides. For Pakistan, the strategic objective should be clear: a peaceful, stable and sovereign Afghanistan that neither harbors threats against Pakistan nor becomes the strategic playground of forces hostile to Pakistani interests.

That is not merely desirable diplomacy; it is Pakistan's long-term western security requirement.

Reviving the Urumqi Process: The Way Back to Negotiations

One of the most promising avenues for breaking the present diplomatic deadlock

is already available: the Urumqi process should be revived immediately.

The April 2006 talks in Urumqi were significant because they brought Pakistan and Afghanistan together under Chinese facilitation at a time when bilateral relations had deteriorated sharply. The discussions included officials responsible for foreign affairs, defense and security, and China subsequently described the talks as candid, pragmatic and focused on solving problems. The three sides agreed that terrorism was the core issue affecting Pakistan-Afghanistan relations and agreed to work towards a comprehensive plan for resolving their differences.

Unfortunately, the momentum generated by Urumqi appears to have stalled. This should not be allowed to become another abandoned diplomatic initiative. Islamabad should actively propose the immediate convening of the second round of the Urumqi dialogue. Indeed, China has already indicated its willingness to continue providing a platform for communication. Pakistan itself welcomed the April Urumqi talks and China's role in facilitating dialogue.

The advantage of Urumqi is that it provides something currently missing from Pakistan-Afghanistan relations: a structured channel in which security concerns can be discussed without either side having to retreat publicly from its established position.

The second round should move beyond general declarations and concentrate on deliverables.

The first and most urgent issue should be the TTP. Pakistan should present specific, verifiable intelligence concerning TTP leadership, camps, recruitment, financing and operational activity in Afghanistan. Kabul should be required to respond to these cases individually rather than rejecting the allegations collectively. If Afghan authorities have already taken action against particular militant elements, as has been reported, these measures should be placed within a verifiable mechanism. Reports in May suggested that Afghan authorities may have detained or relocated Pakistan-facing

militants in provinces including Khost, Paktia, Paktika and Kunar, although these reports were not independently verified.

The second issue should be border security. Pakistan and Afghanistan need a permanent mechanism for preventing local border incidents from escalating into military confrontation. This could include direct communication between field commanders, advance notification of major military movements, procedures for investigating border incidents and agreed mechanisms for handling infiltration.

The third should be trade and transit. Border closures should be treated as an exceptional security measure rather than a normal instrument of state policy. A Urumqi agreement could establish principles for keeping commercial crossings operational even during periods of political tension, with security screening strengthened rather than trade simply suspended.

The fourth should be people-to-people movement. Visa regimes, refugees, divided families, medical travel and legitimate commercial movement require a more predictable framework. Humanitarian considerations need not conflict with Pakistan's security requirements; better documentation and regulated movement can actually strengthen security.

China's role is particularly important because Beijing has interests in the success of the process. It has security concerns relating to militant groups operating from or through Afghanistan, while instability also threatens China's economic and connectivity interests in the region. This gives Beijing a strong incentive to ensure that Urumqi does not become merely another conference but evolves into a continuing diplomatic mechanism.

There is also an important psychological advantage.

Neither Pakistan nor Afghanistan needs to "surrender" at Urumqi.

Pakistan can continue to insist that Afghan territory must not be used for terrorism against Pakistan. Kabul can continue to insist that Afghan sovereignty must be respected. The purpose of negotiations should be to establish a mechanism through which these apparently contradictory positions can coexist.

The Urumqi process should therefore be converted into a standing trilateral framework, with regular meetings and working groups on:

- o counterterrorism and intelligence
- o border management
- o trade and transit
- o refugee and migration issues
- o political and diplomatic relations
- o regional connectivity

The process should also have a mechanism for monitoring implementation. Agreements without verification have little value.

Urumqi Should Become the Diplomatic Off-Ramp

The most important strategic consideration is that Pakistan needs a diplomatic off-ramp from the present cycle of confrontation. Military pressure may compel Kabul to reconsider aspects of its policy, but it cannot create a sustainable relationship. Similarly, Afghanistan's refusal to acknowledge Pakistan's security concerns cannot make those concerns disappear.

Urumqi provides both sides with a face-saving way out. The objective should not be to achieve a grand settlement in one meeting. The immediate goal should be much more modest: stop the deterioration, restore communication, reduce violence and establish confidence-building measures. Once these are achieved, more difficult questions can be addressed.

Pakistan should therefore take the initiative to revive the Urumqi dialogue without waiting

for another crisis. The fact that Beijing is already seeking to revive the process makes this particularly timely. Recent Chinese diplomatic efforts have reportedly focused on convening another round, with Beijing continuing consultations in both Islamabad and Kabul.

If successful, Urumqi could eventually become to Pakistan-Afghanistan relations what other regional dialogue mechanisms have been in different conflicts: not a single

peace conference, but a permanent process for managing disagreements.

And that may be the realistic objective for the future. Pakistan and Afghanistan may not resolve all their differences in the foreseeable future. They can, however, learn to manage those differences without allowing them to become armed conflict. The next Urumqi meeting should therefore be convened not merely to talk, but to negotiate a framework for coexistence.

