

The U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Escalation of Anti-Pakistan Sentiment: Analyzing Causes and Exploring Solutions

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Abstract

In the aftermath of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, a sense of resentment among the people of Afghanistan toward Pakistan has been observed. The Afghans have displayed their resentment towards Pakistan mainly through public protests and online social media campaigns. For Islamabad, this display of antipathy by the Afghans may be rather difficult to comprehend since Islamabad has been hosting millions of Afghan refugees for over three decades. Against this backdrop, this research paper delves into the historical undercurrents of Afghan resentment towards Pakistan and discovers the causes behind it. In doing so, this research paper explores the nature of Pakistan's foreign policy towards Kabul and its role in shaping Afghan perceptions. This paper highlights factors such as Pak-Afghan historical grievances, perceived interference in the internal affairs of Afghanistan, and a protracted refugee crisis as the main drivers of Afghans' resentment toward Pakistan. Lastly, this paper has sought to put forward offers some potential pathways that can be adopted so as to address the rising anti-Pakistan sentiment and promote constructive engagement between Pakistan and Afghanistan.



Keywords: U.S. Afghanistan, Escalation, Anti-Pakistan, Sentiments

I. Introduction

After the withdrawal of U.S troops from Afghanistan in August 2021, a brewing anti-Pakistan sentiment among the people of Afghanistan has come to fore in the form of public protests and social media campaigns. The Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan launched by the government of Pakistan in September 2023, and its consequent implementation further intensified the ire of the people of Afghanistan, living across both sides of the Durand Line. However, the Afghan resentment for Pakistan is not new-founded. For over decades, the people of Afghanistan have resented the essence of Islamabad's Afghan policy, which they view as a gross intervention in its internal affairs. Hence, while the display of anti-Pakistan sentiment by the Afghans may be recent for some observers, yet the phenomenon itself is not as novel as to have begun only after the withdrawal of U.S forces in 2021. This research paper seeks to discover the undercurrents behind the brewing anti-Pakistan sentiment among Afghans by delving into an appraisal of Pakistan's historical and contemporary Afghan policy as a means of achieving its geostrategic and geopolitical goals and its contribution to the rise of anti-Pakistan sentiments among the people of Afghanistan. Despite being a key component of Pak-Afghan bilateral ties, the presence of anti-Pakistan sentiment among Afghans has attracted limited attention and focus from policy-makers and practitioners in Islamabad, until recently. For the larger part, narratives about Pak-Afghan relations had generally been shrouded in claims of "brotherly ties characterized by social, cultural and religious similarities buttressed by territorial contiguity". Practically however, contrary to this notion, the people of Afghanistan perceive Pakistan to be responsible for the protracted Afghan conflict and the consequent instability, which has resulted into their forced migration from Afghanistan to Pakistan and vice versa. The common perception within Pakistan, on the other hand has been that Pakistan has is a savior of the Afghans, as Pakistan has provided them with refuge, socio-

economic security, and military aid, at the cost of Pakistan's own internal security. As Islamabad expects a reciprocity from Afghans in the form of goodwill due to the virtue of Pakistan being the host country of millions of Afghan refugees for over three decades, the Afghans on the other hand view Pakistan with an ire. Hence, within Pakistan, the Afghan resentment towards Pakistan is viewed as misplaced and ill-willed. The recent developments involving the Afghan leadership's accusations and hateful statements against Pakistan, anti-Pakistan protests and slurs by Afghans, and the Afghan mob's attack on Pakistani cricket fans in Dubai have resulted into a reciprocal anti-Afghans sentiment among the people of Pakistan.¹ This indicates a schism between Pakistan-Afghanistan relations.

Hence, the Afghan perception of Pakistan as relentlessly interfering in the internal political and security matters of Afghanistan holds the potential to serve as a major irritant in Pakistan-Afghanistan ties, which are already marred by an exaggerated distrust for each other. The distrust between the neighboring states results from a history of Afghanistan's irredentist claims over Pakistani territories, its unacceptance of the Durand Line, both countries' paroxysm, and cross border terrorism. Consequently, both Afghanistan and Pakistan have been, and are paying a high price for this mutual paranoia in the form of missed opportunities. In this scenario, the bolstering of antagonist sentiments may only worsen the bilateral relations.

2. Manifestations of Anti-Pakistan Sentiment in Afghanistan

In 2021, a series of public protests erupted in different cities and provinces of Afghanistan, against Pakistan's alleged involvement in the domestic affairs of Afghanistan. The premise of the protests was the claim that Islamabad was backing the Taliban advances towards Kabul. In Kabul, hundreds of Afghans came together in protest and chanted anti-Pakistan slogans like "Death to Pakistan".² The protests led to the killing of four people, and were quelled by the Taliban authorities by firing.³ Public protests in the province of Parwan led to the death of an Afghan youth.⁴ In addition to this, protests against the

Taliban and Pakistan's supposed meddling and support for Pakistan took place in Herat.⁵ As the Taliban authorities opened fire to quell the protestors, two protestors lost their lives. Public protests however, were not limited to Afghanistan only. A month earlier, in August, Pakistani authorities had arrested some 194 Afghan nationals in Peshawar, on the charges raising anti-Pakistan slogans and rioting leading to clashes. This indicated the propensity of the eruption of such protests in Pakistan as well.⁶ Apart from Pakistan and Afghanistan, protests also took place in other parts of the world. The Afghan diaspora situated in different countries also registered their protest in front of Pakistani embassies and consulates, calling UNSC to sanction Pakistan. Starting from July onwards, a series of protests transpired in Sweden, Germany, Canada, France, Austria, and the United States. The protestors chanted anti-Pakistan slogans and condemned Pakistan for its interference in Afghanistan.⁷ In addition to public protests, anti-Pakistan sentiments held by Afghans also appeared on social media after the #SanctionPakistan hashtag trended on Twitter. The trend was spearheaded by Afghan journalists and members of the Ghani administration, after Afghanistan's then President Ashraf Ghani claimed that Pakistan was actively supporting the Afghan Taliban.⁸ In response, Islamabad denied the allegations, and stated that the social media trend had been artificially generated.⁹ Pakistan's then National Security Advisor Moeed Yusuf stated that such artificially orchestrated twitter trends were only aimed at scapegoating for two decades of mistakes by the Afghan government.¹⁰ Another wave of anti-Pakistan sentiments arose after Islamabad initiated the deportation of illegal Afghan refugees in November 2023. Anti-Pakistan sentiments on social media ranged from demanding to the Afghan government to cut off the waters of the Kunar River, to imposing economic sanctions on Pakistan. In addition to this, the mishandling of Afghan refugees by Pakistani authorities also caused an ire among Afghans, who demanded counteractive measures to be taken against Pakistan.

However, it is pertinent to note that anti-Pakistan sentiment among the Afghans has been a commonplace since over decades. In 2014, a survey conducted by the Asia Foundation, titled “Afghanistan in 2013: A Survey of the Afghan People” revealed that the Afghan public opinion regarding Pakistan was considerably hostile, as a sizeable majority of the respondents believed that ‘Pakistan’s interference’ was one of the two biggest problems of Afghanistan. The survey also revealed that the Afghans did not acknowledge or recognize Pakistan as among the top few donors to the country in areas relating to educational development, infrastructure rebuilding, and provision of civic amenities. Similarly, public protests have occurred several times in the past as well. In May 2013, anti-Pakistan protests erupted in the province of Kandahar after Pakistani military launched an attack on Afghan security forces. The protests involved slogans of “death to Pakistan” and “Pakistan is behind all problems in Afghanistan”.¹¹ Similarly, in October 2011, protests once again erupted in Afghanistan after Pakistan army’s shelling of border towns and on the assassination of former Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani.¹² The protestors openly blamed Pakistan’s intelligence agency for being allegedly involved in Rabbani’s assassination. In 2007, thousands of Afghans protested in Kabul outside Pakistani embassy, after cross-border clashes erupted between Afghanistan and Pakistan resulting into the killing of 13 Afghans.¹³

3. Understanding Anti-Pakistan Sentiment: A Historical Perspective

A historical analysis of Pakistan’s foreign policy in Afghanistan suggests that Islamabad’s strategic choices of throwing weight behind either of the power-contesting parties in Afghanistan at different points of time have tantamount to Pakistan’s involvement in Afghanistan. Since, Pakistan and Afghanistan have had a chequered history of inter-state relations, with Kabul’s unacceptance of the Durand Line at the heart of this strained relationship, Pakistan has generally sought to favor an Islamabad-friendly government in Kabul. In doing so, Pakistan’s all-out support to particular power-contenders

has come at the cost of a favorable public opinion within Afghanistan for Pakistan. This involvement of Pakistan in Kabul's affairs has also earned it the status of being responsible for Afghanistan's continued instability and the consequent refugee crisis.

3.a) Contextualizing Pakistan's strategic insecurities vis-à-vis Afghanistan

The Durand Line is an international border which was demarcated in 1883 between Afghanistan and British India after the signing of the Durand Agreement between Sir Mortimer Durand of Great Britain and Ameer Abdur Rahman of Afghanistan. However, after the creation of Pakistan, Afghanistan resorted to making irredentist claims over Pakistani territories across the Durand line on the grounds that there existed inconsistencies in the Durand agreement. Such irredentist claims translated into an imminent threat to Pakistan's territorial sovereignty, leading Pakistan to develop a defensive posture vis-à-vis Afghanistan.¹⁴ By 1970s, Afghanistan had also curated the notion of '*Pashtunistan*' - an independent Pashtun state comprising ethnic Pashtuns of the areas adjacent to both sides of the Durand Line. For Pakistan, which was experiencing existential security threats from India already, the notion of *Pashtunistan* further exacerbated security apprehensions.

3.b) The doctrine of strategic depth and its geo-political limitations

In the context of Pakistan's security challenges, Pakistan formulated the doctrine of "strategic depth". In the longer run however, Pakistan's perusal of this doctrine through different real-political approaches and policies further estranged Afghans from Pakistan. Pakistan's geo-strategic limitation in the shape of a limited strategic depth was first identified in 1946 by General Arthur F. Smith, the Chief of General Staff in British India. However, it was not until the late-1980s that Pakistan's military strategists tangibly crafted the doctrine of strategic depth.¹⁵ This was done during Zia-ul-Haq's government under the supervision of General Mirza Aslam Beg, Pakistan's then Chief of Army Staff and General Hamid Gul, Director General of the

Inter-Services Intelligence.¹⁶ This doctrine aimed to enhance Pakistan's westward strategic depth in order to counter the threat of a possible strategic encirclement by India through Afghanistan. The doctrine also entailed the objective of strengthening diplomatic and military ties with Afghanistan and the Arab countries. Pakistan's support to the Afghan Mujahideen first against the Soviet forces, and then against the Soviet-backed government of Najibullah was also its bid to extend its strategic depth in Afghanistan. Since then, Pakistan's interference in Afghanistan's political and strategic affairs has been multifaceted and outright. While Pakistan was operating at its foreign policy front to achieve its strategic securities, however, within Afghanistan this interference was being perceived as unwarranted and trouble-making as it further exacerbated Afghanistan's crisis.

3.c) Implicating Pakistan's Support for Afghan Mujahideen:

Pakistan was at the forefront of supporting the Afghan Mujahideen's fight against the Soviets as a part of the covert nexus of international support to them. Pakistan provided the Mujahideen with trainings and weapons supply. Training camps were set up particularly in Peshawar and the erstwhile Federally-Administered Tribal Areas, and Pakistan became the logistical hub for the Mujahideen, thereby providing medical facilities, safe havens, and supply routes to the fighters. Islamabad recognised seven Sunni militant mujahideen parties, which were later also brought under the banner of the "Peshawar Seven" to signify an apparent unified front. In reality, the Mujahideen were a collection of disparate militant groups, led by warlords who were daggers drawn against each other, engulfed into internecine power struggles vying for the control of Afghanistan, with the political leadership, generally based in Pakistan. The United States and Saudi Arabia poured in around \$7.2 billion of covert aid into the jihad against Soviets, which was further channeled by the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) as finances to the warzones.¹⁷ The ISI deliberately channeled the finances and resources to the most radical religious elements, thereby advertently marginalizing the more

nationalist-political and lesser radical-militant groups in Afghanistan. Consequently, due to the external support of Pakistan, radical-militant forces within Afghanistan gained a stronger foothold in the Afghan society at the cost of marginalized centrist forces. After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in accordance with the Geneva Accords, Pakistan sought to dissuade the probability of a peace settlement between Najibullah's Soviet-backed government and the Mujahideen.¹⁸ After the fall of Najibullah's government in 1992, Islamabad participated in the orchestration of the Mujahideen-led interim government, under the aegis of the Peshawar Accords.¹⁹ The mujahideen leaders quickly fell out of the conditions of the Peshawar accords, and the local law-and-order situation within Afghanistan deeply worsened during the Mujahideen rule. The outcome of Islamabad's policy of supporting radical militant groups was such, that after the Soviet forces withdrew, Afghanistan was quick to get embroiled into another internal crisis and total anarchy and bloodshed.

3.d) Implicating Pakistan's support for the Afghan Taliban

Pakistan's support to the Afghan Taliban, a politico-militant group that rose from Kandahar in 1996 was also placed on the premise of achieving strategic depth. Islamabad hoped that a Taliban-led regime might accept the Durand Line, and could rather operate on an Islamic identity rather than Pashtun identity, which would in return reduce the *Pashtunistan* threat for Pakistan. However, these calculations soon proved to be counterproductive as the Taliban regime neither accepted the Durand Line, nor operated on a strictly Islamic identity, as well as it continued to provide safe havens to anti-Pakistan militants. Ahmed Rashid, an expert on Afghanistan explained this conundrum in the words; "The Taliban were not providing strategic depth to Pakistan, but Pakistan was providing strategic depth to the Taliban."²⁰ Meanwhile, within Pakistan, the policy of supporting the Afghan Taliban remained popular. After General Pervez Musharraf took control of the government in Pakistan through a military coup in 1999, Pakistan's Afghan policy remained

unaffected. At the cost of international isolation, Pakistan continued to maintain its ties with the Taliban, as it viewed the Taliban rule as the best possible means of achieving its strategic goals in Kabul.

However, this policy experienced a dramatic shift in the aftermath of the 9/11 incident followed by the onset of U.S-led Operation Enduring Freedom, in which Pakistan was a frontline state, however, now against the Taliban. Among other requirements, as a frontline U.S-ally, Pakistan was asked to cut off all ties with the Afghan Taliban, freeze Taliban's assets in Pakistan, halt the supply of fuel to the Taliban, and allow air space to the U.S forces for conducting offensive military operations against Afghanistan. The ISI was required to provide the U.S with intelligence on Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda, and the Taliban. Cooperating with the U.S against the Taliban meant creating another arch-rival on Pakistan's doorstep, however, President Musharraf's government decided to do so, however on the condition that India must be accorded no role in the war and any future government that may be formed in Afghanistan.²¹ The Pakistani government evacuated its advisers among the Taliban in Afghanistan, and cut off all supplies to the Taliban. Pakistan's cooperation with the U.S played a very crucial role in ousting the Taliban within three months as the Taliban forces collapsed rapidly in the face of U.S airpower onslaught coupled with the U.S-led revitalization of the Northern Alliance.²² For Taliban however, this was a betrayal from the behest of Islamabad. In the next few years, Pakistan was collaborating with the Pentagon and the U.S intelligence community, offering its services of intelligence provision, logistical support, and border vigilance to the U.S forces. Pakistan opened two-thirds of its airspace, provided airbases and seaports for amphibious operations and even handed over two forward operational air bases to the NATO forces.²³ Pakistan allowed the coalition forces to use four of its air bases located in Pasni, Jacobabad, Shamsi and Dalbandin, along with an access to Kohar and Zhob air bases. The U.S was allowed to land its planes anywhere in Pakistan in case of an

emergency, and was provided an air corridor, an air corridor for launching airstrikes in Afghanistan.²⁴ In so doing, 2/3rd of Pakistan airspace, whereas around 7,000 of Pakistan air force personnel was allocated to this job. Pakistan also provided sea-based facilities to the U.S coalition forces. Pakistan also provided Logistical supplies which reportedly played a characteristic role determining the success of U.S-led operations. Pakistan's intelligence assistance was vital for breaking the backbone of major militant groups. However, the other dimension of Pakistan's participation in the war on terror was Pakistan's continued yet covert support to the Afghan Taliban. Pakistan maintained a functional relationship with the Taliban thereby providing it with different skills like orchestrating terror attacks and crafting explosive devices. Pakistan also provided arsenal to the Taliban, while the porous border continued to covertly facilitate such transactions. However, during the Taliban's insurgency against the US-backed government in Kabul, the weapons and ammunitions were used by the Taliban against the Afghan citizens.²⁵ This dual policy as pursued by Pakistan also led to the inculcation of hatred for Pakistan among ordinary Afghans. This also led policy-makers in Islamabad to ultimately developed a mistaken belief that Pakistan was in a key position of exercising diplomatic and political leverage over Afghan Taliban.²⁶

4. Understanding Anti-Pakistan Sentiment: Contemporary Dynamics

While Anti-Pakistan sentiment is to quite an extent pervasive in the Afghan society, however, the contemporary dynamics, particularly those pertaining to the creation of Afghan refugees, and their dealing and management by Islamabad have further exacerbated the situation. As directly and indirectly, Pakistan has remained a key stakeholder in influencing the internal political matters of Afghanistan, the people of Afghanistan largely view Islamabad as responsible for creating a situation that forced the Afghans to flee their land and homes in the first place. In addition to this, the management of Afghan refugees by Pakistan has also been feeding into the already rising anti-

Pakistan sentiment among the people of Afghanistan. While the international boundary between Pakistan and Afghanistan has remained porous since the larger part of history, however, the first announced mass exodus took place after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. The next episode of mass exodus ensued after the Soviet retreat and the establishment of Mujahideen-led government. The next wave of mass exodus was registered after the U.S invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, whereas the latest wave has been registered after the U.S withdrawal and the Taliban's return to power in 2021. However, it must be noted that despite these episodes of mass exodus, movements and exchanges across the international border have been profoundly rampant throughout. According to the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA), in 2022, Pakistan was homing around 3 million Afghans refugees, out of which 1.4 million were registered and possessed their proof of registration (PoR) cards, around 840,000 were reported to be the holders of the Afghan Citizen Card (ACC), whereas around 77,5000 were estimated to be unregistered refugees.²⁷ Undocumented refugees i.e. those not possessing either of the PoRs or ACCs are usually those who are subject to chances of refoulement, arbitrary arrests, detentions and deportations. In the past decades, the numbers of Afghan refugees have fluctuated between 3 million to 6 million in total.²⁸ Starting from 1992, Islamabad has been devising repatriation policies time and again, and consecutive governments have sought to expedite the process of refugee repatriation. However, the resultant repatriations have not been much effective and have led the refugees in developing grievances against Pakistan. A significant factor this dynamic is the self-identification of the refugees with Pakistan. While refugees constitute a temporary phenomenon, and are expected to return from the host country as soon as the situation becomes conducive to their return. However, in cases of protracted conflicts, refugees develop a sense of identification with the host country refugees' due to urbanization and their inclusion into the social life of the host state.²⁹ In the

case of Afghan refugees, this identity construction, coupled with a lack of confidence in the security conditions of Afghanistan have served as major roadblocks towards an effective repatriation of Afghans to Afghanistan. The social, economic and cultural lives of refugees have considerably altered over the years. Their ways of earning livelihoods, and the hierarchies of social and cultural structures have experienced also experienced dramatic shifts.³⁰ In this scenario, the Afghan refugees find it considerably unfavorable to return to Afghanistan and hence perceive their repatriation as enforced rather than organic amid a largely volatile socio-political situation of Afghanistan. Most repatriation policies devised by Islamabad have not been strict or restricted. However, the repatriation policy devised after the Peshawar School terror attack, demanded an immediate repatriation of unregistered refugees with less flexibility in the deadline.³¹ This majorly contributed to the development of grievances among the Afghan refugees. Most recently, after the withdrawal of the U.S troops from Afghanistan, Pakistan has pressed for an effective and speedy repatriation of refugees, after the country experienced a sharp uptick in terror activity. In September 2023, the government of Pakistan, under a caretaker setup issued the 'Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan'. The plan sought to regulate the presence of foreigners in Pakistan and to carry out their deportation in the context of rising economic and security threats to Pakistan. In substance, the plan was primarily developed and implemented for executing the deportation of unregistered Afghan refugees in Pakistan.³² During the implementation of this plan widespread irregularities and abuses from the behest of Pakistani authorities took place. Some of these were reported to be: collection of bribery, confiscation of jewelries, and livestock and bulldozing of homes.³³ In addition to this the unregistered refugees were provided an incredibly short time to repatriate, thereby causing an immense stress among them.

While mass irregularities were reported on micro-level, the basic legal imperatives have been obliged by Islamabad. The repatriation is being carried

out under the of the Foreigners Act, 1946.³⁴ Additionally, Pakistan is also not a signatory of the 1951 Convention (relating to the Refugees' Status) or its 1967 Protocol. Hence, a legal framework for the management and protection of refugees has not been enacted by Pakistan as such, and consequently Pakistan possesses no relevant domestic frameworks or procedures to regulate and govern the processes of repatriation as such. As a result of absence of legal framework for the determination of refugees, Pakistan depends on temporary and ad-hoc approaches, which leads to the development of grievances among Afghan refugees.

5) Towards mitigating anti-Pakistan sentiment in Afghanistan: Devising the way forward

In order to mitigate the existing anti-Pakistan sentiments among Afghans, the first step that needs to be taken is the conscious recognition of the issue and the underlying causes that have fed into such sentiments. It is equally pertinent for policy-makers and practitioners in Islamabad to recognize the fact that bi-lateral ties between Pakistan and Afghanistan not just operate across state-to-state level, but also operate across societal level. Hence, harboring a favorable public opinion in Afghanistan regarding Pakistan is crucial for bilateral ties going forward. Also, while Islamabad has been diplomatically engaging with the Taliban, and has also sought to provide considerable support to the Taliban government, however, the subject concern is more suited to be addressed via. Public-relationing campaigns. Since, cross border clashes have been a major cause of anti-Pakistan sentiment and protests in Afghanistan, therefore, an improvement in border management can dissuade trust deficit on both sides and can help in fostering mutual understanding. Pakistan should adopt a policy of non-interference in Afghanistan's internal political matters whilst strictly adhering to its demands of Taliban's action against anti-Pakistan militant groups in Afghanistan. As refugee repatriation remains the most pertinent issue vis-à-vis Afghanistan, Islamabad may offer some relaxations for the repatriation, whereas probing

legal and judicial probes into government authorities-led abuses of the unregistered Afghan refugees remains critical. In the larger context, it remains highly pertinent that any future formulation of Afghanistan policy should be ensued by inclusive process of policy formulation led by intensive and inclusive decision-making.

Conclusion

The prevalence of anti-Pakistan sentiment in Afghanistan is a significant challenge for Pakistan. The latent Afghan resentment towards Pakistan is however rooted in strategic insecurities of both countries and consequent grievances spanning over a history of decades. However, since the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan, significant geostrategic security challenges have rose for the region in general, and Pakistan in particular. Therefore, the contemporary dynamics necessitate the need to constructively engage with Afghanistan and redress the drivers that have fueled the feelings of mistrust and animosity. In this regard, diplomatic initiatives aimed at encouraging bilateral understanding, economic cooperation and regional integration are required. Hence, by highlighting the complex interplay of dynamics involved in the exacerbation of anti-Pakistan sentiment in Afghanistan, this research paper has sought to contribute towards an understanding of the phenomenon, and suggest policy recommendations that can be considered by policymakers, analysts, and the relevant stakeholders for the promotion of peace, stability and cooperation between the two countries.

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