	THE STUDY OF RELIGION AND HISTORY Vol.2, No.4, 2024	ISSN P: 3006-3329 ISSN E: 3006-3337
--	---	--

TALIBAN-LED AFGHANISTAN: ASSESSING THE THREATS TO PAKISTAN'S SECURITY AND REGIONAL DIPLOMATIC DYNAMICS

Dr. Amina Shameen

Doctor of Physical Therapy Gulab Devi Educational Complex, MS in Pediatric Physiotherapy (Riphah International University, Lahore), MS in Neuro-Paediatric Physiotherapy (Superior University, Lahore), Master of Arts in Political Science (University of the Punjab), Certified Health Professions Educationist (KEMU), Founder and Chairperson Amina Shameen Welfare Foundation

aminashameenofficial@gmail.com

Abstract

The return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan in 2021 significantly reshaped the security and diplomatic landscape of South and Central Asia. This study examines the implications of Taliban rule for Pakistan's internal security, foreign policy, and regional diplomacy. The research analyzes key challenges including cross-border militancy, refugee flows, border management disputes, economic instability, and the activities of militant organizations such as Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Using a qualitative and analytical methodology, the paper explores Pakistan's evolving diplomatic strategy toward the Taliban government and its engagement with regional actors including China, Iran, Russia, and Central Asian states. The study argues that while Pakistan initially viewed the Taliban's return as a strategic opportunity for regional connectivity and political influence, the persistence of security threats and ideological extremism has complicated bilateral relations. The research further investigates the role of regional organizations and international stakeholders in addressing humanitarian crises, counterterrorism cooperation, and economic reconstruction in Afghanistan. Findings indicate that the absence of inclusive governance and international recognition continues to affect regional stability and Pakistan's strategic calculations. The paper concludes that Pakistan's long-term security and diplomatic objectives depend upon balanced regional engagement, strengthened border security, and coordinated international efforts aimed at achieving stability and political normalization in Afghanistan.

Keywords: *Taliban Government, Afghanistan-Pakistan Relations, Regional Diplomacy, Security Challenges, TTP, Border Security, South Asian Politics*

Part One: The Return of the Taliban and the Changing Political Landscape of Afghanistan

The political transformation of Afghanistan following the return of the Taliban in August 2021 marked one of the most significant geopolitical developments in contemporary South Asian and Middle Eastern politics. The collapse of the Western-backed Afghan Republic and the restoration of Taliban rule altered regional security dynamics, reshaped diplomatic relations, and generated widespread debate concerning governance, legitimacy, human rights, and international law. Afghanistan once again became the center of global strategic attention because of its geographical importance, fragile political institutions, and long history of foreign intervention and internal conflict.

The Taliban's return to power represented not merely a military victory but also the re-emergence of an ideological movement deeply rooted in Afghanistan's socio-religious environment and decades of conflict. While the movement succeeded in regaining political control over the country, it simultaneously inherited severe economic crises, humanitarian emergencies, institutional

collapse, and diplomatic isolation. The post-2021 Afghan landscape therefore reflects a complex interaction between ideology, governance challenges, regional geopolitics, and international expectations.

The evolving situation in Afghanistan continues to influence neighboring states including Pakistan, Iran, China, and Central Asian republics, while also affecting broader international concerns related to terrorism, migration, narcotics trafficking, and regional stability. Consequently, the Taliban government remains an important subject of analysis within international relations, security studies, and political science.

Historical Background of the Taliban Movement in Afghanistan

The Taliban movement emerged during the early 1990s amid the political chaos and civil war that followed the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. After the collapse of the Soviet-backed Afghan government in 1992, rival Mujahideen factions engaged in violent struggles for power, resulting in widespread insecurity, corruption, and social fragmentation. In this environment of instability, the Taliban presented themselves as a movement committed to restoring order, enforcing Islamic law, and ending factional conflict. Ahmed Rashid writes:

“The Taliban emerged in Kandahar in 1994 as a movement of religious students promising peace, disarmament, and the enforcement of Sharia after years of warlordism and civil conflict.”¹

The movement was largely composed of students from Deobandi religious seminaries located in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Many Taliban members had previously participated in the anti-Soviet jihad during the 1980s and were influenced by conservative interpretations of Islamic governance and social order.

The Taliban rapidly expanded their territorial control due to public frustration with warlord violence and political instability. By 1996, they captured Kabul and established the “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.” Their first regime implemented strict social and religious policies, particularly concerning women’s rights, media restrictions, and judicial punishments. William Maley observes:

“The Taliban’s ideology combined elements of Deobandi Islam, Pashtun tribal traditions, and the militarized experiences of the Afghan jihad.”²

The Taliban government remained internationally isolated during the 1990s, receiving formal recognition only from Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. The movement’s relationship with transnational militant organizations, particularly al-Qaeda, became a major source of international concern.

Following the attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States and its allies launched military operations against the Taliban regime for harboring Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda leadership. The Taliban government collapsed rapidly under American military intervention, yet the movement survived and reorganized as an insurgency that would continue for two decades.

¹ Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 21

² William Maley, *The Afghanistan Wars* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 219

The Collapse of the Afghan Republic and the Taliban's Return to Power

The return of the Taliban in August 2021 followed the gradual weakening of the Afghan Republic established after the United States intervention in 2001. Despite substantial international military and financial support, the Afghan government struggled with corruption, political fragmentation, weak governance, and dependence upon foreign assistance.

The signing of the Doha Agreement between the United States and the Taliban in February 2020 significantly altered Afghanistan's political trajectory. The agreement provided a framework for the withdrawal of American troops while opening diplomatic space for the Taliban's political legitimacy. According to the agreement:

*"The United States is committed to withdraw from Afghanistan all military forces of the United States, its allies, and Coalition partners."*³

The withdrawal of international forces accelerated the collapse of Afghan state institutions. Taliban forces rapidly captured provincial capitals across the country, while Afghan security forces experienced declining morale, leadership failures, and logistical breakdowns. Barnett Rubin notes: *"The Afghan state was highly dependent upon external financial and military support, making its institutions vulnerable once that support declined."*⁴

On 15 August 2021, Taliban fighters entered Kabul without major resistance after President Ashraf Ghani fled the country. The sudden collapse of the Afghan Republic shocked much of the international community and exposed the fragility of state-building efforts undertaken during two decades of foreign intervention.

The Taliban subsequently declared the restoration of the "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan." Their return to power marked the end of America's longest war and represented a profound shift in regional political dynamics.

The rapid takeover also generated widespread humanitarian concerns. Thousands attempted to flee Afghanistan amid fears regarding political repression, economic collapse, and restrictions on civil liberties. Images from Kabul airport during the evacuation crisis became symbolic of the chaotic end of the Western-backed Afghan political order.

Governance Structure and Ideological Foundations of the Taliban Regime

The Taliban's governance structure is rooted in a centralized religious leadership model emphasizing Islamic legitimacy, obedience to authority, and implementation of Sharia. Supreme political and religious authority rests with the Amir al-Mu'minin (Commander of the Faithful), currently Hibatullah Akhundzada, whose leadership carries both political and religious significance. Antonio Giustozzi explains:

*"The Taliban's organizational structure reflects a combination of religious hierarchy, military command, and tribal influence."*⁵

³ *Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan*, Doha, Qatar, 2020

⁴ Barnett R. Rubin, *Afghanistan from the Cold War through the War on Terror* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 301

⁵ Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 56

The Taliban administration includes ministries, provincial governors, religious scholars, military commanders, and intelligence institutions. However, governance remains heavily centralized, with major decisions influenced by the movement's senior religious leadership based largely in Kandahar.

Ideologically, the Taliban draw inspiration from Deobandi Islamic thought combined with conservative Afghan social traditions. Their interpretation of Islamic governance emphasizes religious morality, social conservatism, and strict legal implementation. Gilles Dorronsoro writes: *"The Taliban conceive political authority primarily through the framework of religious legitimacy rather than democratic representation."*⁶

The Taliban leadership has repeatedly asserted that their government seeks stability, Islamic justice, and national sovereignty. Nevertheless, critics argue that the regime's restrictions on women's education, media freedom, and political participation undermine claims of inclusive governance.

The absence of democratic electoral institutions and constitutional pluralism remains one of the major criticisms directed toward the Taliban government. International organizations and human rights groups continue to express concerns regarding civil liberties, minority rights, and judicial transparency.

At the same time, Taliban officials argue that their governance system reflects Afghanistan's Islamic and cultural identity rather than Western political models. This ideological distinction remains central to ongoing debates concerning legitimacy and recognition.

Humanitarian, Economic, and Political Challenges in Post-2021 Afghanistan

Following the Taliban takeover, Afghanistan experienced severe humanitarian and economic crises. International sanctions, frozen financial assets, declining foreign aid, and institutional disruption contributed to widespread poverty, unemployment, and food insecurity. The United Nations reported:

*"Afghanistan is facing one of the world's largest humanitarian crises, with millions requiring urgent assistance."*⁷

The collapse of the banking sector and reduction in international development funding significantly weakened Afghanistan's economy. Public sector salaries, healthcare systems, educational institutions, and infrastructure projects faced severe disruption after 2021.

Women and girls were particularly affected by Taliban restrictions on education and employment. International criticism intensified after policies limiting female participation in universities, nongovernmental organizations, and various sectors of public life. Human Rights Watch observed: *"The Taliban have imposed systematic restrictions on women's rights affecting education, employment, movement, and public participation."*⁸

⁶ Gilles Dorronsoro, *Revolution Unending: Afghanistan, 1979 to the Present* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 267

⁷ United Nations Development Programme, *Afghanistan Socio-Economic Outlook 2023* (New York: UNDP, 2023), 11

⁸ Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2023* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2023), 72

Political challenges also emerged within the Taliban administration itself. Questions regarding ethnic inclusivity, internal factionalism, and administrative competence continue to affect governance capacity. Afghanistan's diverse ethnic composition including Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks requires political accommodation that remains difficult under centralized ideological rule.

Furthermore, militant threats from groups such as the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) continue to challenge Taliban authority. Terrorist attacks targeting civilians, mosques, and minority communities demonstrate the persistence of insecurity despite the end of large-scale war. Economic instability additionally contributes to migration pressures and narcotics-related concerns. Afghanistan's dependence upon informal economies and illicit trade complicates efforts toward sustainable development and institutional recovery.

The humanitarian crisis therefore represents not merely a temporary emergency but a structural challenge linked to governance limitations, diplomatic isolation, and long-term economic fragility.

International Recognition and Diplomatic Isolation of the Taliban Government

One of the most significant challenges facing the Taliban government is the issue of international recognition. Since returning to power in 2021, the Taliban have sought diplomatic engagement with regional and global powers, yet no major state has formally recognized the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

International reluctance largely stems from concerns regarding human rights, women's education, counterterrorism commitments, and political inclusivity. Western governments have maintained sanctions and diplomatic restrictions while emphasizing conditions related to governance reforms and international legal obligations. Thomas Ruttig explains:

*"The Taliban seek international legitimacy without fundamentally transforming the ideological foundations of their rule."*⁹

Despite formal diplomatic isolation, the Taliban maintain practical relations with several regional powers including Pakistan, China, Iran, Russia, and Qatar. These states have engaged with Taliban officials primarily due to security, economic, and geopolitical interests.

China has shown interest in Afghanistan's mineral resources and regional connectivity potential, while Pakistan remains concerned about border security and militant movements. Iran and Russia similarly maintain pragmatic engagement focused on regional stability and counterterrorism concerns.

The absence of formal recognition has nevertheless restricted Afghanistan's access to international financial institutions and development assistance. Diplomatic isolation continues to limit economic recovery and institutional normalization.

Stephen Walt argues Recognition in international politics is not merely legal acknowledgment but also a reflection of strategic interests and political legitimacy.

The Taliban leadership has repeatedly called for international recognition and the release of frozen Afghan assets, arguing that diplomatic isolation worsens humanitarian suffering. However, many

⁹ Thomas Ruttig, *Taliban at War: 2001–2021* (London: Hurst & Company, 2022), 311

governments continue to insist that recognition depends upon meaningful policy changes regarding governance, human rights, and counterterrorism commitments.

The future of Afghanistan's international position therefore remains uncertain. While regional actors increasingly pursue pragmatic engagement with the Taliban government, full diplomatic normalization will likely depend upon the regime's ability to balance ideological priorities with international expectations and domestic governance challenges.

Part Two: Security Implications for Pakistan

The return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 significantly transformed Pakistan's security environment. While some policymakers in Pakistan initially viewed the Taliban takeover as an opportunity for strategic stability and reduced Indian influence in Afghanistan, subsequent developments revealed a far more complex and challenging reality. The resurgence of militant organizations, increased cross-border attacks, refugee pressures, and the revival of ideological extremism generated serious concerns for Pakistan's internal and regional security.

Pakistan shares a long and porous border with Afghanistan, historically characterized by tribal mobility, economic interdependence, and weak state control. Consequently, political instability in Afghanistan has consistently produced direct consequences for Pakistan's security landscape. The post-2021 Afghan environment intensified these challenges by creating new opportunities for militant groups, particularly the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), to reorganize and expand their operations.

In addition to security concerns, Pakistan also faced humanitarian, economic, and diplomatic pressures connected to the evolving Afghan situation. Border management disputes, refugee inflows, arms trafficking, and regional geopolitical competition collectively shaped a highly fragile security environment. The Pakistani state therefore adopted a combination of military operations, diplomatic engagement, border fortification, and counterterrorism policies in an attempt to manage the emerging challenges.

Cross-border Terrorism and the Rise of TTP Activities

One of the most serious consequences of the Taliban's return to power has been the resurgence of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The organization, formed in 2007, consists of various militant factions seeking to challenge the Pakistani state through armed insurgency and extremist violence. Following the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan, TTP activities intensified significantly, particularly in Pakistan's northwestern border regions. Abdul Sayed and Tore Hamming observe:

*"The Afghan Taliban's victory provided ideological inspiration and operational space for the TTP, which rapidly increased attacks inside Pakistan after 2021."*¹⁰

Pakistan repeatedly accused the TTP of using Afghan territory as a safe haven for planning and launching attacks against Pakistani security forces. Islamabad expressed concern that the Afghan Taliban administration had failed to take decisive measures against TTP militants operating from across the border.

¹⁰ Abdul Sayed and Tore Hamming, *The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan after the Taliban's Takeover of Afghanistan* (London: Royal United Services Institute, 2023), 7

The TTP's resurgence was reflected in the increasing frequency of attacks targeting military personnel, police officers, religious institutions, and civilians. Suicide bombings and coordinated assaults particularly intensified in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan provinces.

The Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies reported that militant attacks sharply increased after the Taliban's return to power, marking one of the most significant deteriorations in Pakistan's security situation in recent years.¹¹

The ideological impact of the Taliban's victory also contributed to militant confidence. Extremist groups across the region portrayed the withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan as evidence that armed insurgency could defeat major international powers. This narrative strengthened recruitment propaganda among various militant organizations operating in South Asia.

Hassan Abbas writes:

*"The Taliban's success in Afghanistan emboldened militant Islamist groups in Pakistan by reinforcing the perception that armed jihad can successfully challenge state authority."*¹²

Pakistan consequently intensified military operations and intelligence-based counterterrorism measures. However, the persistence of cross-border militancy continued to complicate relations between Islamabad and the Taliban administration in Kabul.

Border Management and the Durand Line Dispute

Border management remains one of the most sensitive issues in Pakistan–Afghanistan relations. The Durand Line, established in 1893 between British India and Afghanistan, has long been disputed by successive Afghan governments. Afghanistan historically resisted formal recognition of the border, arguing that it divided Pashtun tribal communities across both sides.

The Taliban government has similarly demonstrated reluctance to fully endorse Pakistan's border fencing initiatives and territorial claims. Border tensions therefore continued even after the Taliban returned to power. Amin Saikal notes:

*"The Durand Line remains both a geopolitical and symbolic issue deeply connected to Afghan nationalism and regional identity politics."*¹³

Pakistan accelerated construction of border fencing after 2017 in order to limit militant infiltration, smuggling, and illegal crossings. Islamabad presented the fencing project as an essential component of national security and counterterrorism strategy. However, Taliban fighters occasionally removed sections of the fence and criticized Pakistani border policies.

These disputes reflected broader disagreements concerning sovereignty, tribal mobility, and regional influence. Many local communities historically relied upon unrestricted movement across the border for trade, family connections, and seasonal migration. The fencing project therefore

¹¹ Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies, *Annual Security Report 2023* (Islamabad: PICSS, 2023), 14

¹² Hassan Abbas, *The Return of the Pakistani Taliban* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2024), 81

¹³ Amin Saikal, *Modern Afghanistan: A History of Struggle and Survival* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 93

generated social and economic tensions in addition to political controversy. According to Pakistani security officials:

“Border fencing is necessary to regulate movement, prevent terrorist infiltration, and improve national security management.”¹⁴

The Durand Line issue also affects bilateral trust between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Pakistani policymakers often perceive Afghan resistance to border management as indirectly facilitating militant mobility, whereas Afghan actors frequently interpret Pakistani policies as attempts to impose unilateral territorial control.

The persistence of unresolved border disputes therefore continues to undermine regional stability and complicate counterterrorism coordination between the two neighboring states.

Refugee Flows and Human Security Challenges for Pakistan

Afghanistan’s political instability has repeatedly generated large refugee movements into Pakistan over several decades. Following the Taliban’s return in 2021, concerns regarding humanitarian collapse and political uncertainty increased fears of renewed refugee inflows.

Pakistan has historically hosted one of the world’s largest refugee populations. Millions of Afghans entered Pakistan during the Soviet-Afghan War, the Afghan civil war, and subsequent periods of instability. While many refugees contributed economically and socially to local communities, prolonged displacement also created pressures upon Pakistan’s economic resources, healthcare systems, labor markets, and urban infrastructure. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees stated:

“Pakistan has hosted Afghan refugees for more than four decades, making it one of the largest refugee-hosting countries in the world.”¹⁵

The post-2021 environment intensified concerns regarding undocumented migration, border regulation, and internal security. Pakistani authorities increasingly linked irregular refugee movements with security vulnerabilities, particularly in areas affected by militancy and smuggling networks.

At the same time, humanitarian considerations complicated state policy responses. Afghanistan’s economic collapse, food insecurity, and political instability created severe conditions for civilians seeking refuge in neighboring countries. Alexander Betts explains:

“Refugee crises are not merely humanitarian phenomena but also political and security challenges for host states.”¹⁶

The refugee issue also generated domestic political debates within Pakistan. Public concerns regarding employment competition, urban overcrowding, and crime occasionally intensified anti-refugee sentiment. Consequently, Pakistan adopted stricter border regulations and documentation requirements after 2021.

¹⁴ Inter-Services Public Relations, *Pakistan Border Security Briefing* (Rawalpindi: ISPR Publications, 2022), 19

¹⁵ UNHCR, *Afghanistan Situation Operational Update* (Geneva: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2023), 5

¹⁶ Alexander Betts, *Survival Migration* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 48

Nevertheless, refugee management remained a highly sensitive issue because of humanitarian obligations, international scrutiny, and longstanding cultural ties between communities on both sides of the border.

The refugee challenge therefore represents both a humanitarian responsibility and a strategic security concern for Pakistan's long-term regional stability.

Arms Smuggling, Militancy, and Regional Security Concerns

The collapse of Afghan state institutions and the withdrawal of international forces created favorable conditions for arms smuggling and militant expansion across the region. Large quantities of weapons left behind during the American withdrawal reportedly entered illicit regional markets, strengthening militant and criminal organizations.

Pakistan expressed serious concern regarding the proliferation of sophisticated weapons among extremist groups operating in border regions. Militants increasingly utilized advanced firearms, communication systems, and military equipment during attacks against Pakistani security forces. According to a report by the Small Arms Survey:

*"Weapons proliferation in conflict zones significantly increases the operational capabilities of insurgent and criminal networks."*¹⁷

The porous Afghanistan–Pakistan border has historically facilitated smuggling networks involving weapons, narcotics, and contraband goods. Weak governance structures and difficult terrain continue to hinder effective law enforcement efforts in frontier areas.

Militant organizations benefit financially and operationally from these illicit economies. Arms trafficking not only strengthens insurgent groups but also contributes to organized crime and regional insecurity. Antonio Giustozzi notes:

*"The Afghan conflict economy has long depended upon interconnected networks involving smuggling, militancy, and regional patronage systems."*¹⁸

Regional security concerns also intensified because militant organizations increasingly cooperated across national boundaries. Groups operating in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia frequently shared ideological narratives, logistical networks, and recruitment channels.

The expansion of Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) further complicated the regional security environment. ISKP attacks targeted both Taliban authorities and neighboring states, raising fears regarding transnational extremism and regional destabilization.

The interaction between militancy, illicit economies, and weak border governance therefore continues to pose major challenges for Pakistan's national security and regional peace.

Counterterrorism Policies and Pakistan's Security Strategy

In response to the deteriorating security environment after 2021, Pakistan intensified its counterterrorism strategy through military operations, intelligence coordination, diplomatic

¹⁷ Small Arms Survey, *Weapons Compass: The Dynamics of Illicit Arms Trafficking* (Geneva: Graduate Institute Publications, 2022), 27

¹⁸ Antonio Giustozzi, *Empires of Mud: Wars and Warlords in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst & Company, 2009), 144

engagement, and border management reforms. The Pakistani state sought to balance direct security measures with broader regional diplomatic efforts aimed at preventing further instability.

Pakistan's counterterrorism approach has historically relied heavily upon military operations against militant strongholds. Operations such as Zarb-e-Azb and Radd-ul-Fasaad significantly weakened insurgent infrastructure during previous years, yet the resurgence of militancy after the Taliban takeover demonstrated the persistence of underlying security challenges. Christine Fair writes:

*"Pakistan's security strategy combines military operations, border control, and selective political engagement in its effort to manage militant threats."*¹⁹

Pakistan also attempted diplomatic engagement with the Afghan Taliban in order to encourage action against the TTP. Negotiation efforts and temporary ceasefires were periodically pursued, though many failed because of continued militant violence and mutual distrust.

Border fencing and surveillance technologies became increasingly important components of Pakistan's security strategy. Islamabad argued that effective border regulation was essential for limiting militant movement and protecting national sovereignty. The National Counter Terrorism Authority emphasized:

*"A comprehensive counterterrorism framework requires intelligence integration, border security, community resilience, and regional cooperation."*²⁰

Pakistan's strategy also increasingly recognized the importance of economic and social dimensions of security. Development initiatives in former conflict zones, rehabilitation programs, and community engagement were viewed as necessary for preventing extremist recruitment.

However, major challenges remain. Political instability, economic pressures, ideological extremism, and regional geopolitical rivalries continue to complicate Pakistan's security environment. The evolving situation in Afghanistan therefore remains one of the most significant external variables influencing Pakistan's national security calculations in the post-2021 era.

Part Three: Regional Diplomacy and Geopolitical Competition

The return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan in 2021 fundamentally altered the geopolitical dynamics of South Asia, Central Asia, and the broader Middle Eastern region. Afghanistan once again became a central arena of regional diplomacy and strategic competition among global and regional powers. Although the withdrawal of the United States ended direct Western military involvement, it did not reduce Afghanistan's geopolitical importance. Instead, new forms of competition emerged involving regional connectivity, counterterrorism, economic influence, and diplomatic engagement.

Afghanistan's strategic geographical location has historically linked South Asia, Central Asia, China, and the Middle East. Consequently, instability within Afghanistan directly affects neighboring states and regional economic projects. The Taliban administration inherited a

¹⁹ C. Christine Fair, *Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army's Way of War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 217

²⁰ National Counter Terrorism Authority, *National Security Policy of Pakistan 2022–2026* (Islamabad: Government of Pakistan, 2022), 41

politically isolated yet strategically significant state whose future became closely tied to regional diplomatic calculations.

The post-2021 regional environment reflects both cooperation and competition among major actors including Pakistan, China, the United States, Iran, Russia, and Central Asian republics. While these states differ in political objectives and ideological orientations, they share common concerns regarding terrorism, border security, economic connectivity, and regional stability. Afghanistan therefore occupies a pivotal position within emerging regional power politics and evolving geopolitical alignments.

Pakistan–Afghanistan Relations under the Taliban Administration

Pakistan’s relationship with Afghanistan has historically been shaped by geography, ethnicity, security concerns, and regional strategic interests. Following the Taliban’s return to power, Islamabad initially anticipated improved bilateral relations because of its longstanding engagement with Taliban leadership and shared interests regarding regional influence.

However, post-2021 relations proved more complicated than expected. Although Pakistan maintained diplomatic communication and economic engagement with the Taliban administration, tensions rapidly emerged concerning cross-border militancy, the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and border management disputes.

Hassan Abbas observes:

“Pakistan expected strategic advantages after the Taliban takeover, yet the resurgence of the TTP complicated bilateral relations and generated serious security concerns.”²¹

The Taliban government repeatedly emphasized Afghanistan’s sovereignty and resisted direct Pakistani pressure regarding militant sanctuaries. Islamabad accused the TTP of operating from Afghan territory, while Taliban officials frequently denied responsibility or encouraged dialogue instead of military confrontation.

The Durand Line dispute further strained bilateral relations. Pakistan accelerated border fencing projects to regulate movement and strengthen security, but Taliban forces occasionally objected to sections of the fencing near disputed border areas. Amin Saikal writes:

“Afghan governments, including the Taliban, have historically viewed the Durand Line issue through the lens of sovereignty, nationalism, and Pashtun identity.”²²

Despite these tensions, economic and diplomatic cooperation continued in several areas. Pakistan remained one of Afghanistan’s primary trade partners and supported humanitarian assistance efforts during Afghanistan’s economic crisis. High-level diplomatic engagements between both governments reflected mutual recognition of geographic interdependence and security necessity. Pakistan’s broader regional strategy toward Afghanistan also remained connected to concerns regarding Indian influence, border stability, refugee flows, and economic connectivity projects

²¹ Hassan Abbas, *The Return of the Pakistani Taliban* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2024), 104

²² Amin Saikal, *Modern Afghanistan: A History of Struggle and Survival* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 96

linking South and Central Asia. Consequently, Islamabad continued pursuing pragmatic engagement with the Taliban administration despite persistent security disagreements.

China's Strategic Interests and Regional Connectivity Projects

China's growing involvement in Afghanistan reflects its broader regional ambitions connected to economic expansion, strategic connectivity, and security stabilization. Although Beijing avoided direct military involvement in Afghanistan, it increasingly pursued diplomatic and economic engagement after the Taliban's return to power.

China's primary concerns regarding Afghanistan include regional stability, counterterrorism, and the protection of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects. Beijing fears that instability in Afghanistan could encourage militant activity affecting China's Xinjiang region and threaten broader connectivity initiatives across Asia. Andrew Small explains:

*"China's Afghanistan policy is shaped less by ideological concerns and more by security calculations tied to Xinjiang and regional economic integration."*²³

Afghanistan's geographic location offers potential strategic value within China's regional connectivity strategy. Although Afghanistan is not yet fully integrated into the Belt and Road Initiative, Chinese policymakers view regional infrastructure development as a mechanism for promoting stability and economic influence.

China has also shown interest in Afghanistan's substantial mineral resources, including lithium, copper, and rare earth elements. Chinese companies previously negotiated mining agreements in Afghanistan, though insecurity and political instability delayed major investments. David Shambaugh notes:

*"China increasingly uses economic diplomacy and infrastructure investment as instruments of geopolitical influence across Asia."*²⁴

The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) further connects Afghanistan to broader regional strategic calculations. Beijing has encouraged discussions regarding the potential extension of CPEC into Afghanistan, which could strengthen regional trade networks linking South Asia, Central Asia, and western China.

At the same time, China remains cautious regarding direct political endorsement of the Taliban regime. Beijing maintains pragmatic diplomatic engagement focused upon security cooperation, economic opportunity, and regional stability while avoiding full diplomatic recognition.

China's growing role therefore reflects the broader transformation of Asian geopolitics in which economic connectivity increasingly functions as a strategic instrument of influence and regional order.

The Role of the United States after Withdrawal from Afghanistan

Although the United States ended its military presence in Afghanistan in 2021, it continues to play an important role in regional politics through diplomacy, sanctions, humanitarian assistance, and

²³ Andrew Small, *The China–Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics* (London: Hurst & Company, 2015), 143

²⁴ David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 178

counterterrorism policy. The American withdrawal marked the conclusion of two decades of military intervention but did not eliminate Washington's strategic interests in the region. The United States remains concerned about terrorism, regional instability, women's rights, and humanitarian conditions under Taliban rule. American policymakers have sought to balance diplomatic pressure upon the Taliban with humanitarian engagement intended to prevent total economic collapse. Joseph Nye writes:

*"Even after military withdrawal, great powers continue to shape regional outcomes through economic leverage, diplomacy, and institutional influence."*²⁵

Following the withdrawal, Washington adopted a policy of conditional engagement. The Taliban government was denied formal recognition, and Afghan financial assets remained partially frozen due to concerns regarding governance, human rights, and counterterrorism commitments.

The United States also continued "over-the-horizon" counterterrorism strategies aimed at monitoring extremist organizations such as al-Qaeda and Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). The 2022 drone strike that killed al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in Kabul demonstrated that the United States retained intelligence and operational capabilities affecting Afghanistan even after withdrawal. Stephen Walt argues:

*"Withdrawal from direct military intervention does not necessarily imply disengagement from geopolitical competition."*²⁶

American withdrawal also created strategic opportunities for regional powers including China, Russia, and Iran to expand influence within Afghanistan. Some analysts interpreted the withdrawal as evidence of declining American regional commitment, while others viewed it as a strategic recalibration toward broader Indo-Pacific priorities.

At the humanitarian level, the United States remained one of the largest contributors of international aid to Afghanistan through multilateral organizations. Nevertheless, tensions persisted between humanitarian engagement and political pressure upon the Taliban administration.

The post-withdrawal American role therefore reflects a transition from direct military occupation toward indirect strategic influence shaped by diplomacy, economic policy, intelligence operations, and regional partnerships.

Iran, Russia, and Central Asian States in Afghan Diplomacy

Iran, Russia, and the Central Asian republics have all pursued active diplomatic engagement with Afghanistan due to shared security concerns and geopolitical interests. The Taliban's return to power compelled neighboring states to reassess their regional strategies and establish pragmatic relations with the new Afghan authorities.

Iran's Afghanistan policy is influenced by border security, refugee flows, sectarian concerns, and regional economic interests. Tehran maintains complex relations with the Taliban shaped by both cooperation and mistrust. Although Iran opposed the Taliban during the 1990s, it adopted a more

²⁵ Joseph S. Nye Jr., *The Future of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2011), 102

²⁶ Stephen M. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 219

pragmatic approach after 2021 in order to secure border stability and limit American influence in the region. Anoushiravan Ehteshami observes:

*“Iran’s Afghan strategy reflects a mixture of security pragmatism, regional influence, and concern regarding Sunni extremism.”*²⁷

Russia similarly expanded diplomatic engagement with the Taliban administration despite historical memories of the Soviet-Afghan War. Moscow’s primary concerns include extremist threats to Central Asia, narcotics trafficking, and regional instability.

Russia increasingly views Afghanistan through the broader framework of Eurasian security. Diplomatic initiatives involving the “Moscow Format” aimed to encourage regional dialogue concerning Afghanistan’s political future and counterterrorism coordination. Ekaterina Stepanova writes:

*“Russia’s Afghanistan policy prioritizes regional stability and the containment of transnational militant threats in Central Asia.”*²⁸

Central Asian republics including Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan also pursued cautious engagement with the Taliban government. These states are particularly concerned about border security, extremist infiltration, and refugee pressures.

At the same time, Central Asian governments recognize Afghanistan’s economic significance for regional connectivity projects involving energy transmission, rail networks, and trade corridors. Consequently, many adopted pragmatic diplomatic strategies balancing security concerns with economic interests.

The growing involvement of Iran, Russia, and Central Asian states reflects the emergence of a more regionally driven Afghan diplomatic environment after the reduction of Western military influence.

Afghanistan’s Position in Emerging Regional Power Politics

Afghanistan occupies a strategically vital position within contemporary regional power politics because of its geographic location, security significance, and economic potential. The country serves as a connecting space between South Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East, and China, making it central to emerging geopolitical alignments.

Historically, Afghanistan has frequently functioned as a buffer state between competing empires and regional powers. In the twenty-first century, however, Afghanistan increasingly represents a geopolitical crossroads where issues of connectivity, energy security, terrorism, and strategic competition intersect.

Zbigniew Brzezinski writes:

*“Control over Eurasian geopolitical pivots has historically shaped broader regional and global balances of power.”*²⁹

²⁷ Anoushiravan Ehteshami, *After Khomeini: The Iranian Second Republic* (London: Routledge, 1995), 133

²⁸ Ekaterina Stepanova, *Terrorism in Asymmetrical Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 201

²⁹ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 41

Regional powers now view Afghanistan not only through military and ideological lenses but also through economic and infrastructural perspectives. Connectivity projects involving roads, railways, pipelines, and trade corridors have increased Afghanistan's strategic importance.

At the same time, Afghanistan remains vulnerable to proxy competition and geopolitical rivalry. Competing interests among China, India, Pakistan, Iran, Russia, and Western powers continue to influence Afghan diplomacy and internal stability.

The Taliban administration seeks international legitimacy and economic integration while simultaneously attempting to preserve ideological authority and political autonomy. Balancing these objectives remains one of the major challenges facing Afghanistan's leadership. Thomas Barfield observes:

*"Afghanistan's strategic importance has always exceeded its material power because of its location at the intersection of competing regional systems."*³⁰

The future role of Afghanistan in regional politics will therefore depend upon several interconnected factors including internal stability, diplomatic recognition, economic recovery, and the evolving balance of power across Asia. If stability improves, Afghanistan could potentially emerge as an important corridor of regional connectivity. However, continued insecurity and political isolation may instead reinforce its position as a source of regional instability and geopolitical competition.

Part Four: Economic and Strategic Dimensions of Taliban-ruled Afghanistan

The return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan in 2021 significantly reshaped the economic and strategic landscape of the region. Afghanistan's geopolitical location, natural resources, and potential role in regional connectivity projects have renewed international interest despite the country's political instability and diplomatic isolation. Although the Taliban administration faces serious governance and economic challenges, Afghanistan continues to occupy a strategically important position linking South Asia, Central Asia, China, Iran, and the Middle East.

The economic future of Afghanistan remains deeply interconnected with regional trade networks, transit routes, and infrastructural initiatives. Pakistan, China, Iran, and Central Asian states increasingly view Afghanistan as both a security challenge and a potential economic corridor. At the same time, informal economies, narcotics trafficking, and financial instability continue to undermine sustainable development and institutional recovery.

The strategic competition among regional and global powers further complicates Afghanistan's economic prospects. Various states seek influence through trade agreements, connectivity projects, diplomatic engagement, and investment initiatives. Consequently, Afghanistan's economic dimension cannot be separated from broader geopolitical calculations shaping the emerging regional order.

Trade and Transit Opportunities between Pakistan and Afghanistan

Trade relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan have historically constituted one of the most significant economic dimensions of bilateral interaction. Afghanistan depends heavily upon

³⁰ Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 287

Pakistani ports, transportation networks, and markets for access to international trade, while Pakistan views Afghanistan as an important gateway to Central Asia.

Following the Taliban's return to power, both countries emphasized the importance of restoring commercial stability and maintaining transit trade arrangements. Despite political tensions and security concerns, economic interdependence continued to shape bilateral relations.

The Afghanistan–Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA) remains central to regional commerce. The agreement facilitates the movement of goods between Afghanistan and Pakistani ports, particularly Karachi and Gwadar.

According to the World Bank:

“Afghanistan’s geographic position gives it the potential to function as a regional land bridge connecting South Asia with Central Asia and the Middle East.”³¹

Pakistan has repeatedly emphasized the strategic importance of expanding regional trade through Afghanistan. Improved transportation networks and customs cooperation could significantly enhance regional economic integration and create new opportunities for commerce and investment.

At the same time, border closures, political disputes, and militant violence frequently disrupt trade activities. Security instability along crossing points such as Torkham and Chaman continues to affect commercial flows and increase transportation costs.

Amin Saikal notes:

“Economic cooperation between Pakistan and Afghanistan remains constrained by mutual mistrust, insecurity, and unresolved political disputes.”³²

The Taliban administration has expressed interest in strengthening regional trade and attracting foreign investment. However, international sanctions, weak banking systems, and limited diplomatic recognition continue to restrict Afghanistan's broader economic integration.

Nevertheless, regional states increasingly recognize that economic engagement may contribute to long-term stability by reducing poverty, unemployment, and social fragmentation within Afghanistan.

The Future of Regional Connectivity and CPEC Extension Prospects

Regional connectivity has become one of the defining themes of contemporary Asian geopolitics, and Afghanistan occupies a strategically significant position within these evolving economic frameworks. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), particularly the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), has intensified discussions regarding Afghanistan's potential integration into regional infrastructure projects.

China and Pakistan have periodically explored the possibility of extending CPEC into Afghanistan through transportation corridors, energy networks, and trade infrastructure. Such integration could

³¹ World Bank, *Afghanistan Development Update* (Washington D.C.: World Bank Publications, 2022), 18

³² Amin Saikal, *Modern Afghanistan: A History of Struggle and Survival* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 241

potentially connect Afghanistan more directly with Gwadar Port, Central Asian markets, and western China. Andrew Small writes:

*“Afghanistan’s inclusion in regional connectivity projects could strengthen China’s broader strategy of linking South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East through economic corridors.”*³³

The strategic importance of Afghanistan within regional connectivity projects derives largely from geography. Stable transportation routes through Afghan territory could reduce trade barriers, shorten transit times, and facilitate regional economic cooperation.

China has shown cautious interest in supporting infrastructure development within Afghanistan, particularly in sectors connected to mining, transportation, and regional trade. However, Beijing remains highly concerned about security risks, militant activity, and political instability. David Shambaugh observes:

*“China’s connectivity strategy depends heavily upon political stability and secure infrastructure environments.”*³⁴

Pakistan similarly views Afghan connectivity as strategically valuable for expanding access to Central Asian energy resources and markets. Regional projects such as the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India (TAPI) gas pipeline also reflect the economic potential of Afghan transit routes.

Nevertheless, significant obstacles remain. Security instability, international sanctions, financial constraints, and weak institutional capacity continue to hinder large-scale investment initiatives. The lack of formal international recognition for the Taliban government further complicates long-term economic planning.

Despite these challenges, Afghanistan’s geographic position ensures that it will remain central to future discussions regarding regional integration and Asian connectivity.

Mineral Resources and Economic Potential of Afghanistan

Afghanistan possesses substantial untapped mineral wealth, including copper, lithium, iron ore, gold, rare earth elements, and precious stones. These resources have attracted international attention because of their potential economic value and strategic importance in global industrial production.

Geological surveys conducted during the past two decades suggested that Afghanistan’s mineral deposits may be worth trillions of dollars. Lithium reserves, in particular, have generated growing interest due to increasing global demand for batteries and renewable energy technologies. The United States Geological Survey reported:

*“Afghanistan contains world-class mineral deposits that could contribute significantly to economic development if managed effectively.”*³⁵

³³ Andrew Small, *The China–Pakistan Axis: Asia’s New Geopolitics* (London: Hurst & Company, 2015), 177

³⁴ David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 201

³⁵ United States Geological Survey, *Mineral Resource Potential of Afghanistan* (Washington D.C.: USGS Publications, 2011), 6

China has emerged as one of the most active external actors interested in Afghanistan's mineral sector. Chinese companies previously secured contracts related to copper mining projects such as Mes Aynak, though insecurity and political uncertainty delayed implementation. William Byrd notes:

*"Afghanistan's mineral sector offers substantial long-term opportunities but faces serious governance, infrastructure, and security challenges."*³⁶

The Taliban government has promoted mining as a potential source of revenue and economic recovery. Taliban officials repeatedly encouraged foreign investment in Afghanistan's resource sector following their return to power.

However, resource extraction remains constrained by several structural problems including inadequate infrastructure, corruption risks, weak legal frameworks, environmental concerns, and ongoing insecurity. In addition, the absence of internationally recognized financial systems limits large-scale foreign investment.

The exploitation of Afghanistan's mineral wealth also carries geopolitical implications. Control over strategic resources increasingly intersects with broader competition among regional and global powers seeking economic influence within Asia.

If managed transparently and sustainably, Afghanistan's mineral sector could contribute significantly to national development and regional economic integration. However, without institutional reforms and political stability, resource competition may instead reinforce corruption, inequality, and geopolitical rivalry.

Drug Trafficking, Informal Economies, and Financial Instability

One of the most persistent challenges facing Afghanistan's economy is its dependence upon informal economic structures and narcotics production. For decades, Afghanistan remained one of the world's largest producers of opium, and the drug trade became deeply integrated into local livelihoods, regional smuggling networks, and conflict economies. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime stated:

*"Afghanistan's illicit drug economy has long played a central role in financing armed groups and sustaining informal economic networks."*³⁷

The Taliban historically maintained a complex relationship with narcotics production. During different periods, the movement alternated between restricting cultivation and taxing drug-related activities as a source of revenue. After returning to power, Taliban authorities announced bans on poppy cultivation, though implementation remained uneven across various regions.

Informal economies in Afghanistan extend beyond narcotics trafficking. Smuggling, unregulated trade, hawala financial systems, and illicit taxation networks continue to shape economic activity throughout the country. Weak institutional governance and limited formal employment

³⁶ William Byrd, *Afghanistan's Economy: The Challenge of Growth and Stability* (Washington D.C.: World Bank Publications, 2015), 154

³⁷ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2022* (Vienna: UNODC Publications, 2022), 12

opportunities contribute to the persistence of these parallel economic structures. Antonio Giustozzi explains:

“Conflict economies in Afghanistan evolved through interconnected networks involving militancy, patronage, smuggling, and informal finance.”³⁸

Financial instability intensified after 2021 because of frozen international assets, banking restrictions, declining foreign aid, and sanctions imposed upon the Taliban administration. The collapse of state revenues and reductions in international assistance created severe liquidity shortages and economic hardship.

Afghanistan’s fragile banking sector struggled to maintain public confidence, while inflation and unemployment significantly increased humanitarian pressures. Many families became dependent upon remittances, humanitarian aid, and informal economic activities for survival.

The persistence of illicit economies therefore reflects both economic necessity and institutional weakness. Without sustainable economic alternatives, Afghanistan risks continued dependence upon unstable and illegal financial networks that undermine governance and regional security.

Strategic Competition over Influence in Afghanistan

Afghanistan’s economic and strategic significance has intensified competition among regional and global powers seeking influence within the country. Although the United States withdrew militarily in 2021, Afghanistan remains central to broader geopolitical calculations involving China, Pakistan, Iran, Russia, India, and Central Asian states.

Each regional actor approaches Afghanistan through different strategic priorities. Pakistan emphasizes border security and regional connectivity; China focuses upon economic integration and counterterrorism concerns; Iran prioritizes border stability and regional influence; Russia seeks to prevent extremist expansion into Central Asia; and India remains concerned about political marginalization after the Taliban takeover. Zbigniew Brzezinski writes:

“Geopolitical competition over strategically located regions often reflects broader struggles for influence across Eurasia.”³⁹

Afghanistan’s strategic location between South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East increases its geopolitical value despite its economic fragility. Infrastructure corridors, energy pipelines, and trade routes passing through Afghan territory possess long-term strategic importance for regional integration.

India’s reduced diplomatic presence after 2021 created opportunities for Pakistan and China to expand influence, though New Delhi gradually resumed limited engagement with Taliban authorities through humanitarian and diplomatic channels.

Meanwhile, Russia and Iran pursued pragmatic relations with the Taliban administration in order to secure regional interests and counter perceived Western influence. Regional powers increasingly adopted flexible diplomatic approaches emphasizing practical engagement rather than ideological alignment.

³⁸ Antonio Giustozzi, *Empires of Mud: Wars and Warlords in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst & Company, 2009), 167

³⁹ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 124

Thomas Barfield notes:

“Afghanistan’s strategic significance derives less from its internal strength than from its position at the intersection of competing regional systems.”⁴⁰

The strategic competition surrounding Afghanistan therefore reflects larger transformations within Asian geopolitics. Economic corridors, energy security, terrorism concerns, and great-power rivalry collectively shape regional engagement with Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.

The future direction of Afghanistan’s economic and strategic role will largely depend upon internal stability, diplomatic normalization, and the ability of regional actors to balance competition with cooperative security and development initiatives.

Part Five: Future Prospects and Policy Recommendations

The return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan in 2021 significantly reshaped the economic and strategic landscape of the region. Afghanistan’s geopolitical location, natural resources, and potential role in regional connectivity projects have renewed international interest despite the country’s political instability and diplomatic isolation. Although the Taliban administration faces serious governance and economic challenges, Afghanistan continues to occupy a strategically important position linking South Asia, Central Asia, China, Iran, and the Middle East.

The economic future of Afghanistan remains deeply interconnected with regional trade networks, transit routes, and infrastructural initiatives. Pakistan, China, Iran, and Central Asian states increasingly view Afghanistan as both a security challenge and a potential economic corridor. At the same time, informal economies, narcotics trafficking, and financial instability continue to undermine sustainable development and institutional recovery.

The strategic competition among regional and global powers further complicates Afghanistan’s economic prospects. Various states seek influence through trade agreements, connectivity projects, diplomatic engagement, and investment initiatives. Consequently, Afghanistan’s economic dimension cannot be separated from broader geopolitical calculations shaping the emerging regional order.

Trade and Transit Opportunities between Pakistan and Afghanistan

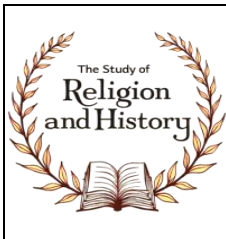
Trade relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan have historically constituted one of the most significant economic dimensions of bilateral interaction. Afghanistan depends heavily upon Pakistani ports, transportation networks, and markets for access to international trade, while Pakistan views Afghanistan as an important gateway to Central Asia.

Following the Taliban’s return to power, both countries emphasized the importance of restoring commercial stability and maintaining transit trade arrangements. Despite political tensions and security concerns, economic interdependence continued to shape bilateral relations.

The Afghanistan–Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA) remains central to regional commerce. The agreement facilitates the movement of goods between Afghanistan and Pakistani ports, particularly Karachi and Gwadar.

According to the World Bank:

⁴⁰ Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 301

	THE STUDY OF RELIGION AND HISTORY Vol.2, No.4, 2024	ISSN P: 3006-3329 ISSN E: 3006-3337
--	---	--

“Afghanistan’s geographic position gives it the potential to function as a regional land bridge connecting South Asia with Central Asia and the Middle East.”⁴¹

Pakistan has repeatedly emphasized the strategic importance of expanding regional trade through Afghanistan. Improved transportation networks and customs cooperation could significantly enhance regional economic integration and create new opportunities for commerce and investment.

At the same time, border closures, political disputes, and militant violence frequently disrupt trade activities. Security instability along crossing points such as Torkham and Chaman continues to affect commercial flows and increase transportation costs.

Amin Saikal notes:

“Economic cooperation between Pakistan and Afghanistan remains constrained by mutual mistrust, insecurity, and unresolved political disputes.”⁴²

The Taliban administration has expressed interest in strengthening regional trade and attracting foreign investment. However, international sanctions, weak banking systems, and limited diplomatic recognition continue to restrict Afghanistan’s broader economic integration.

Nevertheless, regional states increasingly recognize that economic engagement may contribute to long-term stability by reducing poverty, unemployment, and social fragmentation within Afghanistan.

The Future of Regional Connectivity and CPEC Extension Prospects

Regional connectivity has become one of the defining themes of contemporary Asian geopolitics, and Afghanistan occupies a strategically significant position within these evolving economic frameworks. China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), particularly the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), has intensified discussions regarding Afghanistan’s potential integration into regional infrastructure projects.

China and Pakistan have periodically explored the possibility of extending CPEC into Afghanistan through transportation corridors, energy networks, and trade infrastructure. Such integration could potentially connect Afghanistan more directly with Gwadar Port, Central Asian markets, and western China. Andrew Small writes:

“Afghanistan’s inclusion in regional connectivity projects could strengthen China’s broader strategy of linking South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East through economic corridors.”⁴³

The strategic importance of Afghanistan within regional connectivity projects derives largely from geography. Stable transportation routes through Afghan territory could reduce trade barriers, shorten transit times, and facilitate regional economic cooperation.

⁴¹ World Bank, *Afghanistan Development Update* (Washington D.C.: World Bank Publications, 2022), 18

⁴² Amin Saikal, *Modern Afghanistan: A History of Struggle and Survival* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 241

⁴³ Andrew Small, *The China–Pakistan Axis: Asia’s New Geopolitics* (London: Hurst & Company, 2015), 177

China has shown cautious interest in supporting infrastructure development within Afghanistan, particularly in sectors connected to mining, transportation, and regional trade. However, Beijing remains highly concerned about security risks, militant activity, and political instability. David Shambaugh observes:

“China’s connectivity strategy depends heavily upon political stability and secure infrastructure environments.”⁴⁴

Pakistan similarly views Afghan connectivity as strategically valuable for expanding access to Central Asian energy resources and markets. Regional projects such as the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India (TAPI) gas pipeline also reflect the economic potential of Afghan transit routes.

Nevertheless, significant obstacles remain. Security instability, international sanctions, financial constraints, and weak institutional capacity continue to hinder large-scale investment initiatives. The lack of formal international recognition for the Taliban government further complicates long-term economic planning.

Despite these challenges, Afghanistan’s geographic position ensures that it will remain central to future discussions regarding regional integration and Asian connectivity.

Mineral Resources and Economic Potential of Afghanistan

Afghanistan possesses substantial untapped mineral wealth, including copper, lithium, iron ore, gold, rare earth elements, and precious stones. These resources have attracted international attention because of their potential economic value and strategic importance in global industrial production.

Geological surveys conducted during the past two decades suggested that Afghanistan’s mineral deposits may be worth trillions of dollars. Lithium reserves, in particular, have generated growing interest due to increasing global demand for batteries and renewable energy technologies.

The United States Geological Survey reported:

“Afghanistan contains world-class mineral deposits that could contribute significantly to economic development if managed effectively.”⁴⁵

China has emerged as one of the most active external actors interested in Afghanistan’s mineral sector. Chinese companies previously secured contracts related to copper mining projects such as Mes Aynak, though insecurity and political uncertainty delayed implementation. William Byrd notes:

“Afghanistan’s mineral sector offers substantial long-term opportunities but faces serious governance, infrastructure, and security challenges.”⁴⁶

⁴⁴ David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 201

⁴⁵ United States Geological Survey, *Mineral Resource Potential of Afghanistan* (Washington D.C.: USGS Publications, 2011), 6

⁴⁶ William Byrd, *Afghanistan’s Economy: The Challenge of Growth and Stability* (Washington D.C.: World Bank Publications, 2015), 154

The Taliban government has promoted mining as a potential source of revenue and economic recovery. Taliban officials repeatedly encouraged foreign investment in Afghanistan's resource sector following their return to power.

However, resource extraction remains constrained by several structural problems including inadequate infrastructure, corruption risks, weak legal frameworks, environmental concerns, and ongoing insecurity. In addition, the absence of internationally recognized financial systems limits large-scale foreign investment.

The exploitation of Afghanistan's mineral wealth also carries geopolitical implications. Control over strategic resources increasingly intersects with broader competition among regional and global powers seeking economic influence within Asia.

If managed transparently and sustainably, Afghanistan's mineral sector could contribute significantly to national development and regional economic integration. However, without institutional reforms and political stability, resource competition may instead reinforce corruption, inequality, and geopolitical rivalry.

Drug Trafficking, Informal Economies, and Financial Instability

One of the most persistent challenges facing Afghanistan's economy is its dependence upon informal economic structures and narcotics production. For decades, Afghanistan remained one of the world's largest producers of opium, and the drug trade became deeply integrated into local livelihoods, regional smuggling networks, and conflict economies. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime stated:

*"Afghanistan's illicit drug economy has long played a central role in financing armed groups and sustaining informal economic networks."*⁴⁷

The Taliban historically maintained a complex relationship with narcotics production. During different periods, the movement alternated between restricting cultivation and taxing drug-related activities as a source of revenue. After returning to power, Taliban authorities announced bans on poppy cultivation, though implementation remained uneven across various regions.

Informal economies in Afghanistan extend beyond narcotics trafficking. Smuggling, unregulated trade, hawala financial systems, and illicit taxation networks continue to shape economic activity throughout the country. Weak institutional governance and limited formal employment opportunities contribute to the persistence of these parallel economic structures. Antonio Giustozzi explains:

*"Conflict economies in Afghanistan evolved through interconnected networks involving militancy, patronage, smuggling, and informal finance."*⁴⁸

Financial instability intensified after 2021 because of frozen international assets, banking restrictions, declining foreign aid, and sanctions imposed upon the Taliban administration. The

⁴⁷ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2022* (Vienna: UNODC Publications, 2022), 12

⁴⁸ Antonio Giustozzi, *Empires of Mud: Wars and Warlords in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst & Company, 2009), 167

collapse of state revenues and reductions in international assistance created severe liquidity shortages and economic hardship.

Afghanistan's fragile banking sector struggled to maintain public confidence, while inflation and unemployment significantly increased humanitarian pressures. Many families became dependent upon remittances, humanitarian aid, and informal economic activities for survival.

The persistence of illicit economies therefore reflects both economic necessity and institutional weakness. Without sustainable economic alternatives, Afghanistan risks continued dependence upon unstable and illegal financial networks that undermine governance and regional security.

Strategic Competition over Influence in Afghanistan

Afghanistan's economic and strategic significance has intensified competition among regional and global powers seeking influence within the country. Although the United States withdrew militarily in 2021, Afghanistan remains central to broader geopolitical calculations involving China, Pakistan, Iran, Russia, India, and Central Asian states.

Each regional actor approaches Afghanistan through different strategic priorities. Pakistan emphasizes border security and regional connectivity; China focuses upon economic integration and counterterrorism concerns; Iran prioritizes border stability and regional influence; Russia seeks to prevent extremist expansion into Central Asia; and India remains concerned about political marginalization after the Taliban takeover. Zbigniew Brzezinski writes:

*"Geopolitical competition over strategically located regions often reflects broader struggles for influence across Eurasia."*⁴⁹

Afghanistan's strategic location between South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East increases its geopolitical value despite its economic fragility. Infrastructure corridors, energy pipelines, and trade routes passing through Afghan territory possess long-term strategic importance for regional integration.

India's reduced diplomatic presence after 2021 created opportunities for Pakistan and China to expand influence, though New Delhi gradually resumed limited engagement with Taliban authorities through humanitarian and diplomatic channels.

Meanwhile, Russia and Iran pursued pragmatic relations with the Taliban administration in order to secure regional interests and counter perceived Western influence. Regional powers increasingly adopted flexible diplomatic approaches emphasizing practical engagement rather than ideological alignment.

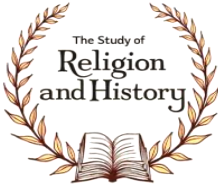
Thomas Barfield notes:

*"Afghanistan's strategic significance derives less from its internal strength than from its position at the intersection of competing regional systems."*⁵⁰

The strategic competition surrounding Afghanistan therefore reflects larger transformations within Asian geopolitics. Economic corridors, energy security, terrorism concerns, and great-power rivalry collectively shape regional engagement with Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.

⁴⁹ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 124

⁵⁰ Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 301

	THE STUDY OF RELIGION AND HISTORY Vol.2, No.4, 2024	ISSN P: 3006-3329 ISSN E: 3006-3337
---	---	---

The future direction of Afghanistan’s economic and strategic role will largely depend upon internal stability, diplomatic normalization, and the ability of regional actors to balance competition with cooperative security and development initiatives.