

US-Pakistan Relations Post-US Withdrawal from Afghanistan: A Shift in Dynamics?

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The long US-Pakistan relationship has seen many ups and downs over the decades. One of the most significant influences was the US-led war in Afghanistan, which ultimately led to a deterioration in relations. Pakistani leaders believed the US expected more than Pakistan was able to contribute while American leaders called Pakistan duplicitous and alleged that the country provided safe havens to terrorists, despite Pakistan struggling with a Taliban insurgency itself. However, the two countries seem to have reached an alignment in terms of envisioning a peaceful Afghanistan. This has created an opportunity to redefine and transform the US-Pakistan relationship from a patron-client state relationship to a bona fide strategic partnership that both countries have the potential to build and benefit from amidst shifting regional and global dynamics.

Introduction

President Biden announced an unconditional withdrawal of United States (US) forces from Afghanistan in April 2021, after two decades of war following the September 11 attacks in 2001. The US and Pakistan, while technically allies in the US-led war in Afghanistan, have had a long, vacillating relationship that has spanned decades when it comes to security cooperation. In the course of the last two decades, the countries' relations can only be described as murky, rife with miscommunication, mistrust and resentment.

This policy outlook provides a historical account of the US-Pakistan relationship, detailing their engagement during the Cold War as well as the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. It then highlights the trajectory of the US war in Afghanistan and Pakistan's engagement during each of its four phases. The Afghan Peace Process will be discussed, including Pakistan's role in bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table and the regional dynamics that affected it. Finally, the paper analyses the impact of the US war in Afghanistan on the US-Pakistan relationship and hypothesizes that the given circumstances may allow for a redefinition of US-Pakistan relations as the US military presence in Afghanistan draws to a close. Ultimately, the outlook offers insights and recommendations for the US and Pakistan as they navigate not just their present shared security challenges in Afghanistan but also the terms of their future engagement.

US-Pakistan Relations: A Historical Account

The US and Pakistan have had a long relationship, albeit one that ebbs and flows. Soon after independence from the British Raj, Pakistan was faced with a choice that was faced by many countries at the time: to engage with the US or the USSR during the early years of the Cold War. Pakistan was wooed by the US due to having "important [symbolic value](#) as an ally both as the then-largest Muslim country with a salient geopolitical location", as well as a link connecting the American "chain of alliances from Europe to the Middle East to Asia in the Cold War's containment policy". As part of [alliance politics during the Cold War](#), Pakistan became the 'key point of an [anti-Communist bulwark of regional countries](#).

In exchange, the [US offered support on the issue of Kashmir](#) and provided military and economic assistance to Pakistan well into the 1980s, particularly during their

engagement against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. The Kashmir dispute has been one of the most protracted conflicts in modern history. The origin of this conflict dates from before the births of India and Pakistan, who have fought two wars over the territory. With both India and Pakistan having divergent positions regarding a path towards resolution, the decades-old Kashmir conflict has been difficult to resolve¹, and both countries have historically relied on the [assistance of foreign support](#) for their respective positions on Kashmir. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the US [had more room to focus on economic development](#) and investments in overseas markets. This led the US to downgrade its focus on Pakistan, which also meant that Islamabad lost its support regarding the Kashmir conflict.

Further deterioration in relations took place when the US banned the sale of military hardware and halted economic aid to Pakistan by 1990, creating a significant trust deficit between the two.

Nevertheless, following the September 11 attacks, the [US once again sought Pakistan's help](#) in Afghanistan against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda and in its broader so-called 'War on Terror'. Essentially, Pakistan had to choose between joining the US-led war and not joining and facing 'America's wrath'. Essentially, experts believe Pakistan [did not have a choice](#). As a spill-over effect from the war in Afghanistan, Pakistan struggled with a Taliban insurgency on its soil from the mid-2000s onwards that has cost the country more than [83,000 lives](#) and suffered the loss of more than [150 billion USD](#). However, many US officials were unsupportive of Pakistan's role in the US war in Afghanistan, accusing the country of [facilitating terrorists](#), which led to a significant deterioration in the US-Pakistan relationship.

In response to the above, the US-Pakistan relationship appeared to develop two attributes. Firstly, the [relationship was mainly driven by the US](#), characterised by a patron-client state dynamic, with each "[specific task given to Islamabad](#)" by Washington" being deemed critically important not only in terms of foreign policy but also in US domestic politics. With regards to the latter, the focus was on how well the US handled national security and the threat of terrorism, both politically charged issues impacting elections and policymaking in the wake of the 9/11 attacks in 2001.

Secondly, much of the US-Pakistan relationship, because of its focus on military and intelligence cooperation with many aspects of it beyond the view of the US public, has an "[underworld](#)" quality to it. This has led to, on multiple occasions, US administrations being unable to

¹ "There have been [numerous attempts](#) on the part of the United Nations (UN) to mediate between the two nuclear-armed neighbours, starting with the McNaughton Proposals of 1950. One of these is the establishment of the United Nations Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan (UNMOGIP) to observe and report violations of the ceasefire following the Karachi Agreement signed by Pakistan and India in 1951. Following the Indo-Pak War of 1971 when the Simla Agreement was signed, however, Pakistan and India disagreed on the mandate of the UNMOGIP. India argues that it lapsed after the Simla Agreement as it was specifically established only for and after the Karachi Agreement. The ceasefire remains in place until today. However, it is regularly violated.

Taliban's spread accelerates in Afghanistan



In Afghanistan, **90 out of 407 districts** are under the complete control of the **Taliban**, while **64 districts** are fully controlled by government forces

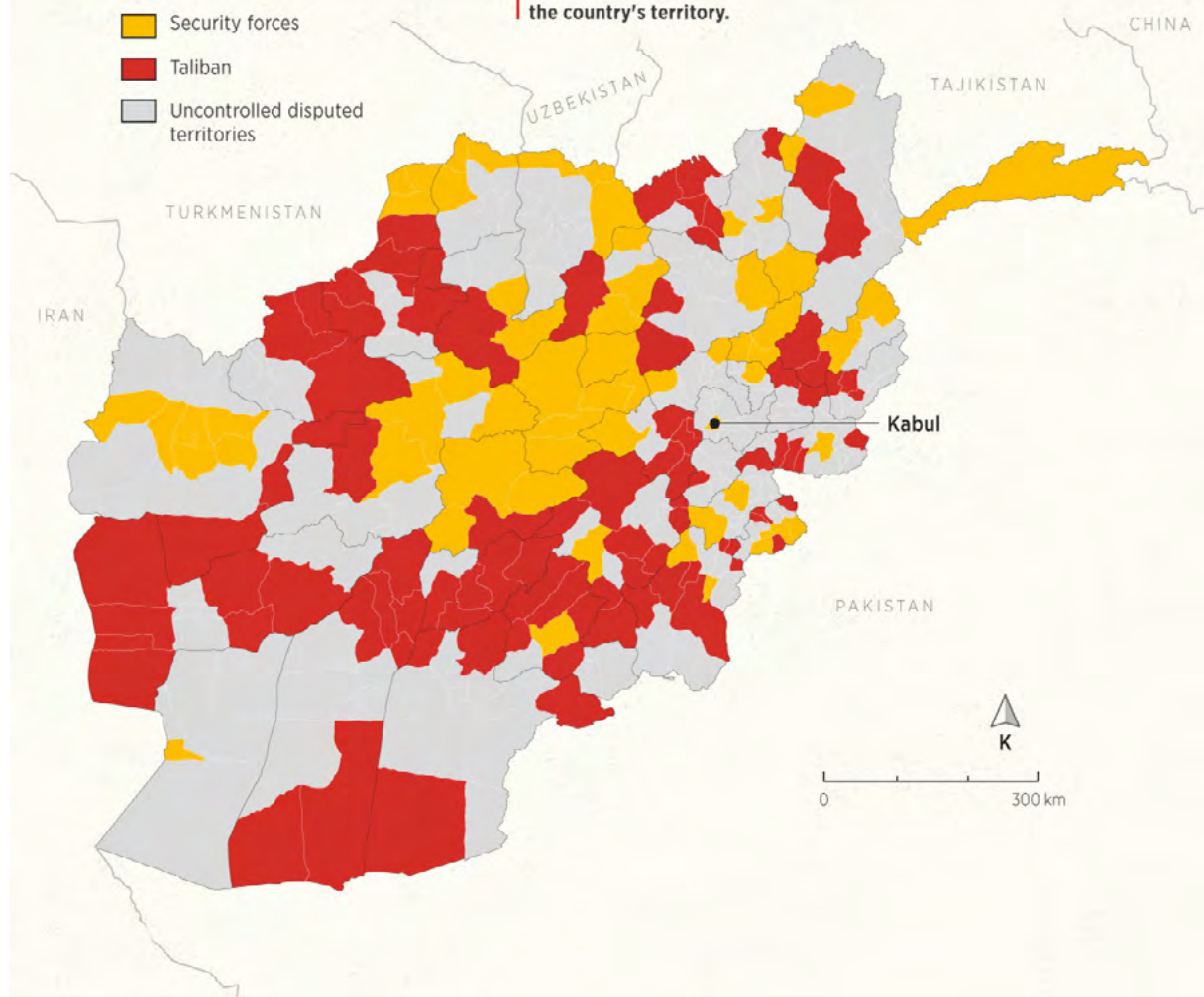
In the remaining areas that make up most of the country, **neither government forces nor the Taliban have not able to prevail over the other**

According to UN figures, the Taliban **have seized 50-70% of the country's territory.**

Taliban elements are present **30 kilometers** of the capital **Kabul**.

The Kabul government, which controls all of the provincial centers, maintains full control in 25% of the districts.

In recent weeks, the **Taliban** has **expanded north and west**, seizing districts in consecutive attacks.



Source: Anadolu Agency

"orchestrate domestic political support for Pakistan" even if they had wanted to, such as in the case of Pakistani military governments that provided the kind of help that "a [democratic and nationalist government](#) in Pakistan would not". Thus, the US-Pakistan relationship remained restricted to the patron-client state dynamic, with security cooperation persisting to be the highlight of the oft-troubled relationship.

The Afghan Imbroglio and its Impact on US-Pakistan Relations

Prior to the US war in Afghanistan, the country had already witnessed over two decades of conflict. In December 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan ostensibly to "restore stability following a coup that brought to power a pair of [Marxist-Leninist political groups](#)". However, this was resisted by the locals - known as the Mujahideen, who drew upon Islam as their [uniting source of inspiration](#) and were supported by both the US and Pakistan - who started a nationwide rebellion against the Soviets. Pakistan served as a US '[stalking horse](#)' in the 1980s. In cooperation with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), it channelled almost 3 billion USD worth of covert assistance to the Mujahideen and trained over 80,000 of them. The Mujahideen were joined by foreign fighters who soon formed a [network for coordination](#) purposes that later came to be known as al-Qaeda, the same group that was deemed responsible for the 9/11 attacks. Once the Mujahideen defeated Soviet forces in 1989, they also toppled the Soviet-backed government in Afghanistan. However, infighting between the Mujahideen led to instability, particularly as they were armed with US-made weapons supplied to them during the Soviet invasion by the US itself. As at least five Mujahideen armies battled for control of Kabul and the city [lost almost 75 per cent of its population](#), either to death or displacement. Some of these militant groups formed coalition governments that broke down due to continued violence. Pakistan supported the Hizb-e-Islami of Gulbuddin Hikmatyar, a Pashtun²-dominated group, that espoused [an Islamist rather than nationalist agenda](#), to protect Pakistan's interests of not allowing a Pashtun dominated Mujahideen army to create an independent Pashtun state from Pakistan and Afghan territory. When Hikmatyar was defeated, Pakistan allegedly [supported the Taliban](#), founded by Mullah Omar who was also part of the Mujahideen, which eventually formed a government in Kabul in 1996. The Taliban government adhered to and instituted a severe interpretation of Islamic law, leading to [significant human rights abuses](#). The country was also suffering from decades of civil war and the basic needs of the Afghan population were not being met.



Afghan President Ashraf Ghani (R) meets the Prime Minister of Pakistan Imran Khan (L) after welcoming ceremony at the Presidential Palace in Kabul, Afghanistan on November 19, 2020. (Afghan Presidency - Anadolu Agency)

The Taliban government was recognized diplomatically by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) only. During this time, the Taliban sheltered Osama bin Laden, the Saudi billionaire who had fought against the Soviets in the 1980s as part of the foreign Mujahideen, who was also supporting the Taliban financially. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) imposed sanctions on the Taliban in December 2000 for aiding bin Laden who led Al Qaeda by planning and administering international terror acts, and eventually also masterminding the 9/11 attacks in New York City in 2001³. However, when the US asked the Taliban to hand over Osama bin Laden, the Taliban refused to do so if evidence of bin Laden orchestrating the attacks was not produced by the US. This ultimately led to the US launching a military operation to oust the Taliban that started in October 2001. Pakistan at this point was, as noted above, [not given a choice](#) when it came to supporting the US against a government that the country had initially recognised and supported for its national interests. As per current Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan, the Pakistani government at the time called the US a "[wounded bear](#)" that might do anything to avenge the 9/11 attacks, including attack Pakistan itself.

The US war in Afghanistan consisted of four phases: the military operation to oust the Taliban that lasted two months, American attempts at "[nation-building](#)" that continued till 2008, the counterinsurgency efforts that lasted till 2014 and the post-2014 drawdown of foreign troops in Afghanistan as well as the subsequent transition process. The initial phase of the conflict appeared to have been won by the US [with relative ease](#). However, nation-building is a concept mired in controversy and ambiguity. In terms of definition, nation-building is a set of processes by which a foreign power, "by direct intervention as well as in collaboration with favoured domestic political elites, seek to erect or re-erect a country-wide institutional and material infrastructure" to ensure an [enduring foundation](#)

² An ethnic group found in both Pakistan and Afghanistan.

³ It is to be noted that none of the militants that executed the actual 9/11 attacks were Afghan.

[of political stability](#) following armed conflict and civil strife. While some scholars considered it to be “an ideological veil for US imperial ambitions” in Afghanistan, others believed it to be a normative concept to allow for a smooth transition to an enduring democracy in the country by ‘[winning of hearts and minds](#)’ of the local people to support a new restructured system of government.

However, the US was not thorough or clear in terms of what exactly was required from its officials or agencies, and by 2008, the local population was suffering. More than [25 per cent](#) of Afghans did not have access to clean water, while [50 per cent of the children](#) were malnourished. Unemployment skyrocketed due to a lack of agricultural or industrial opportunities. Schools were without resources, road networks did not exist and there was [little sewerage or electricity infrastructure outside of and even in Kabul](#). Incidents of crime increased exponentially. This may have been because development efforts were inadequately funded - only 38 billion USD were provided for humanitarian and reconstruction efforts between 2001 and 2009, out of which half was spent to train and equip Afghan security forces. The development funds are also said to be squandered due to confusion over whether civilian or military authorities had responsibility for leading education, health, agriculture, and other development projects. Moreover, corruption became endemic in the country, undermining faith in the reconstruction effort. The Afghan public witnessed limited oversight of lucrative reconstruction projects by the military and aid community, leading to “[bribery, fraud, extortion, and nepotism, as well as the empowerment of abusive warlords and their militias](#)”. There were many reports of poverty and unemployment pushing Afghans to join the resurgent Taliban, and any efforts to build an Afghan army or police force were, as noted above, inadequately funded as well as [marred by ethnic differences](#) amongst Afghans. Needless to say, the US’ nation-building efforts did not bear fruit as expected.

The third phase focused on counterinsurgency efforts to contain the regrouping and resurgence of the Taliban, to protect “the [population from Taliban attacks](#) and [support] efforts to reintegrate insurgents into Afghan society”. However, this approach appeared to be largely unsuccessful as insurgent attacks and civilian casualties [remained stubbornly high](#), mainly because Afghan security forces, despite being American trained, remained ill-equipped to fight the Taliban. With the Taliban’s resurgence, anti-Americanism also rose in Afghanistan, spurred on by the “sluggish pace of reconstruction, [allegations of prisoner abuse at U.S. detention facilities](#), widespread corruption in the Afghan government, and civilian casualties” caused by US bombings.

According to Robert Gates, who served as US Secretary of Defense for President George W. Bush and President Barack Obama from 2006 to 2011:

“There is little doubt the [United States made strategic mistakes in Afghanistan](#). We vastly underestimated the challenge of changing an ancient culture and of nation-building in a historically highly decentralized country. We never figured out what to do about the Taliban safe haven in Pakistan. We developed an Afghan military that was largely modelled on our own, with heavy dependence on sophisticated logistics and equipment that the Afghan government is unlikely to be able to sustain without us”

By 2011, the US realized that a military solution to the problems in Afghanistan may not be possible and that [a political dialogue may be necessary](#). This realization made Pakistan critical because of their alleged influence over the Taliban that would, in theory, translate into an ability to bring them to the negotiating table. However, throughout all of the phases of the US war in Afghanistan, some incidents had negatively impacted the US-Pakistan relationship. During the December 2001 Tora Bora operation, the US did not inform the Pakistan government or military that limited Pakistan’s ability and preparedness to prevent or defend itself against the hundreds of Al-Qaeda members that [crossed into Pakistan](#) via the porous border, despite the country providing logistical support by providing the use of three military bases within its territory. Despite being considered a purported ally, Pakistan found out about the operation from other sources and not the US. Critics had also questioned [why the US allowed the Afghan forces](#) to conduct the Tora Bora operation instead of executing it themselves. Another notable incident was when a CIA contractor, Raymond Davis, killed two Pakistani pedestrians in Lahore, Pakistan, due to reckless driving. The [US refused to confirm that Davis belonged to the CIA](#), leading to significant tensions between the two countries. After the US agreed to pull out all CIA operatives from the country and money was paid to the victims’ families, Davis was allowed to leave Pakistan. Arguably, the most damaging incident was the [capture and killing of Osama bin Laden](#) in May 2011 in Abbottabad, Pakistan, with ‘Operation Neptune Spear’ conducted within Pakistan entirely by US Navy SEALs without the knowledge of the Pakistani state. This incident “severely angered the Pakistani public and embarrassed the Pakistani Armed Forces that was [domestically seen as unable to protect](#) the country” against foreign invasion while being [internationally suspected](#) to provide [protection](#) to the Taliban. Soon after, Pakistan was asked by the US to dismantle the Haqqani network in the tribal areas of the country, which was allegedly connected to the Taliban. The Haqqani network was founded by Jalaluddin Haqqani, an Afghan warlord that fought the Soviets and was part of the above noted Hizb-e-Islam that later aligned with the Taliban after they came to power. This was refused by Pakistan that had supported the group for its own national interests during the Afghan civil war as

noted above, which led to a crisis in their relations when the Haqqani network launched an operation against the US embassy in Kabul. Even though diplomatic efforts led to slight diffusion of tensions, a NATO attack on an Afghan border post in Pakistan that resulted in [the deaths of 24 Pakistani soldiers](#) soon upended any progress made. This led to Pakistan blocking NATO supply routes through its territory until the [US offered an official apology](#).

Despite periods of close cooperation and deft backdoor diplomacy that worked to defuse tensions at the most acrimonious of times, the US-Pakistan relationship has clearly been fraught with mistrust during much of the US war in Afghanistan. What that means for the Afghan Peace Process and the future of the bilateral relationship itself, and whether it will change in response to changing regional dynamics, remains to be seen.

The Afghan Peace Process

As early as the 2001 Bonn conference, Pakistan had asked the US to include the Taliban in the roadmap for constitutional and political restructuring in post-invasion Afghanistan. Pakistan's viewpoint was validated in 2011 when President Obama's administration signalled its intent to engage the Taliban as it planned the Americans' departure from Afghanistan. By July 2015, Pakistan was hosting the first direct formal meeting between the Taliban and the Afghan government with the US and Chinese representatives present.

One of President Trump's electoral promises in 2016 was to end "[endless wars](#)" that the US had been embroiled in. In 2017, as noted above, President Trump criticised Pakistan for "[playing a double game](#)", benefiting from US assistance and then, naming the Taliban, of giving "[safe havens to terrorist organisations](#)". However, President Trump indicated his administration's willingness to hold direct talks with the Taliban bypassing the Afghan government, which was one of the Taliban's demands in order for them to participate in the Afghan peace process. Pakistan was of the view that a political settlement is the only way forward, and that a political deal would also protect Pakistan's interests by stabilizing Pakistan's conflict-prone western borders. This allowed US and Pakistani priorities to converge, which made the relationship more cooperative. Recognising Pakistan's role in the peace process, the US kept the Pakistani leadership abreast of the peace talks. In April 2019, US special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad [appreciated Pakistan's efforts](#) in facilitating the Afghan Peace Process. A US-Taliban peace deal was signed in February 2020 that outlined a firm schedule for the departure of foreign troops from Afghanistan in return for Taliban pledges to cut ties with terrorist organisations including Al-Qaeda. Pakistan welcomed the deal, hoping to garner rewards from the US,

such as political support for the [country's removal](#) from the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) 'grey list' that Pakistan found itself on in 2018.

However, due to [political infighting in Kabul as well as the lack of flexibility](#) displayed by both the Taliban and the Afghan government, the peace talks did not pick up speed. As President Biden won the US Presidential Election in November 2020, all sides were waiting to see whether the US would honour the February 2020 US-Taliban deal. By April 2021, President Biden announced [an unconditional withdrawal of US forces](#) by September 11 2021, twenty years after the US first attacked Afghanistan. With most US troops having left Afghanistan by July 2021 and the Taliban gaining territory throughout the country, a negotiated political deal is at risk.

Shifting Dynamics of US-Pakistan Relations?

Pakistan had hoped that the Biden administration would allow for a reset of the US-Pakistan relationship beyond what has previously been a very narrow focus based on Afghanistan, particularly after the role it had played in bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table. Pakistan wanted a strategic, rather than a purely transactional, relationship with the US that included trade and investment. However, since President Biden has taken office in January 2021, there has been no notable policy shift towards Pakistan, and, according to experts, it appears that Washington continues to view Pakistan through the Afghanistan lens. While the Trump administration also viewed Pakistan via the Afghanistan lens, it "[privileged Pakistan over all other third parties on Afghanistan](#)", which the Biden administration has not done. As per a leaked letter to President Ashraf Ghani of Afghanistan from US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, India and Iran were also mentioned alongside Russia, China and Pakistan as countries that had a stake in the Afghan Peace Process. The inclusion of India may translate into a larger role for the country moving forward. This may be worrying for Pakistan as officials believe that India supports "[militancy and terrorism](#)" in Afghanistan and uses Afghan soil "[for hybrid warfare in Pakistan](#)". In June 2021, [a bomb blast in Lahore was attributed](#) by the Pakistani government to the Indian intelligence agency Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) that had used an Afghan refugee living in Pakistan to execute the attack. New Delhi did not respond to the allegation. Moreover, as per a February 2021 report to the UNSC, the UN Analytical and Monitoring Team reported that the terrorist group Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) [is now based in Afghanistan](#), and has executed at least 100 cross-border attacks between July and October 2020. As per Pakistan's envoy to the UN, India is [prolonging conflict](#)

[and strife](#) in both Afghanistan and Pakistan by supporting terrorist groups like the TTP. Experts have suggested that the inclusion of India in the Afghanistan strategy may even be the US employing [a carrot and stick approach](#) with Pakistan, conditioning its support on critical issues such as Kashmir in exchange for help in Afghanistan. However, Pakistan perhaps no longer wants American intervention to help resolve the Kashmir dispute because, as succinctly stated by Dhruva Jaishankar in a policy paper published by the Brookings Institute, [“Washington now tilts in India’s favour”](#).

As the US and its NATO allies departed Afghanistan, the US wanted Pakistan to, firstly, leverage its influence on the Taliban to engage with the Afghan government to come to a political solution and secondly, to provide access to US bases in Pakistan to monitor security in Afghanistan. However, in terms of the first demand, Pakistan is insisting it has done all it could “bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table, and that there are [real limits to its leverage over the group](#)”. As per PM Imran Khan, [Pakistan lost any leverage it had](#) over the Taliban as soon as President Biden announced a date for the unconditional withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan because the Taliban are “thinking that [they won the war](#)”. And so, therefore, our ability to influence them diminishes the stronger they feel”. While people in the US may believe Pakistan’s support for the Taliban led to the US losing the war in Afghanistan, Pakistanis “tend to [begudge the demand to “do more”](#) to rein in the Taliban”, especially considering the US itself signed a peace deal with them. Additionally, PM Imran Khan has stated that Pakistan will not allow the US to have bases in the country, stressing that Pakistan can now only be a “[partner in peace](#), and not a partner in conflict”, respecting and cooperating with whichever government the [Afghan people choose](#). Continuing in his address to the National Assembly in June 2021, PM Imran Khan [stated](#):

“When we gave so many services, did they (US) praise us or acknowledge our sacrifices? Instead, they called us a hypocrite and blamed us. Instead of appreciating us, Pakistan was bad-mouthed.”

It can be hypothesized that Pakistan losing leverage over the Taliban can translate to the US losing leverage over Pakistan due to Pakistan historically over-promising and under-delivering when it comes to US demands. Perhaps admitting Pakistan’s limitations can finally bring clarity to the otherwise murky US-Pakistan relationship, rife with miscommunication and resentment. Speaking about the “[lopsided relationship](#)” between the US and Pakistan in an interview to [The New York Times](#), PM Imran Khan commented that:

“The US kept expecting more from Pakistan. And unfortunately, Pakistani governments tried to deliver what they were not capable of. So there was this mistrust between the two countries.

And people in Pakistan felt they paid a heavy, heavy price for this relationship. And the US thought Pakistan had not done enough.”

Pakistan may not have the required leverage over the Taliban as it claims but it seems to have another lever that may be of interest when it comes to the US-Pakistan relationship, and that is its burgeoning relationship with China. Pakistan has become [the very centre](#) of China’s Belt and Road mega multinational infrastructure initiative with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is likely to help consolidate China’s influence in the region, which is not ideal for the US. Pakistan is being asked to choose between the West and China, as per PM Imran Khan. However, as per regional experts such as Hina Rabbani Khar, Pakistan’s former foreign minister, it would be “foolish” for Pakistan to compromise on what is proving to be a “strong, pure and proper [strategic alignment and strategic relationship with China](#)”. You can’t wish a strategic relationship. It’s based on an alignment of visions and reasons”. It must be noted that Pakistan had always wanted a strategic alliance with the US, having been called “[America’s most allied ally in Asia](#)” by the 1960s, however, their relationship has [predominantly morphed into a patron-client one](#) with limited influence for both.

Given the narrow lens President Biden’s administration chooses to view the country through, this is likely not going to change with: the US-Pakistan relationship is going to continue to be driven by the US’ focus on [military and intelligence cooperation](#) with Pakistan only. For example, President Biden’s administration was reluctant to invite Pakistan to a leaders summit on climate change hosted by the US - the only one amongst the world’s ten most populous nations [to not receive an invitation](#). Pakistan’s absence was “all the [more pointed](#) given Pakistan’s efforts to mitigate climate change”. Furthermore, the US considers [India strategically important](#) in the larger ‘Indo-Pacific’ region, a term coined to denote “US-led [containment strategy](#) directed against China”, increasingly supplanting the previously used term ‘Asia-Pacific’. According to a report commissioned by the Pentagon, “there is a broad consensus within Washington and Delhi that each depends on the other to sustain a [favourable strategic equilibrium as Chinese power rises](#)”. Maintaining a strategic relationship with India and Pakistan may have been possible for the US, even though it would have been difficult given that it would have required serious intent and intervention on behalf of the US to resolve the Kashmir dispute, a mediation attempt likely to be rejected by India⁴, had Pakistan not maintained such close ties with China. However, given China’s significant investment in Pakistan, their strategic alignments including on the topic of Kashmir and the fact that the US has not been able to view Pakistan through any lens beyond security throughout their relationship, Pakistan is not likely to withdraw from further Chinese engagement.

India, the country the US is banking on to compete with China regionally, has been severely [impacted by Covid-19](#), which led to the Indian economy contracting by 8 per cent. The US, however, [did not offer to help India](#) gain access to badly needed raw materials for vaccines when adversaries such as China and even Pakistan did. On the other hand, Pakistan's economy grew by 4 per cent despite Covid-19, partly powered by CPEC expanding into more [advanced phases](#) of development. Moreover, China donated millions of vaccine doses to Pakistan and Pakistan started to [co-produce](#) the Chinese single-dose vaccine CanSino locally. This difference in the American and Chinese approaches towards proclaimed allies in terms of capacity development during a global pandemic may have been noted by both India and Pakistan, potentially cementing China's influence in Pakistan and perhaps giving pause to India, which has historically [promoted non-alignment](#), about becoming a US-backed bulwark against Chinese influence in the region.

In addition, Taliban forces have been capturing district after district in the Afghan countryside throughout July 2021, encircling provincial capitals. American policymakers are worried that they too would be turning to China, "giving Beijing access to their [country's mineral resources](#)", in exchange for international recognition from China.

Given these facts, the US would be well-advised to reconsider their foreign policy when it comes to countries in the region especially with respect to China's growing influence. Perhaps this is why, on July 8th 2021, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price acknowledged Pakistan as a "helpful and constructive partner" when it comes to Afghanistan, and that "the shared interests of [both the countries go well beyond](#) [Afghanistan]". As per reports, the present situation will likely lead to the [redefining of Pakistan-US ties](#). This is likely better for Pakistan also as it is "an imperative for Pakistan to be seen as an [independent player](#)", and not rely entirely on any one country, something the Pakistani government under PM Imran Khan is striving for in what they describe as foreign policy pivoting away from geopolitics and instead focused on '[geoeconomics](#)'. Additionally, the US and Pakistan seem to share an alignment when it comes to envisioning a future for Afghanistan: a political solution in the form of a power-sharing agreement between the various political stakeholders in the country including the Taliban. Pakistan, as stated by PM Imran Khan, does not have "[any favourites](#)" and does not want any "[strategic depth](#)" in Afghanistan. This may be because, as noted above, Pakistan does not have the influence over the Taliban as assumed and it does not want extremism that characterised 1990s Afghanistan to [spill across](#) its western border that led the country to become a [target for terrorism](#) for many years.

Given all the factors described above, there is a strong likelihood that the junction the US and Pakistan find themselves at may translate to a redefined US-Pakistan relationship. If there is a redefinition, and they are able to restructure their relationship from a patron-client state one to a bona fide strategic partnership that they have the potential to build, it could benefit both countries in the context of Afghanistan as well as beyond.

Conclusion

The US and Pakistan have had a long relationship, with many ups and downs, that has primarily focused on military and intelligence collaboration. The relationship has been driven mostly by the US and many of its aspects are not known to the US public. One of the biggest influences on the US-Pakistan relationship was the US war in Afghanistan. Following the September 11 attacks in 2001 planned and executed by Al Qaeda, the US sought Pakistan's help in Afghanistan against the Taliban who had provided shelter to Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. Pakistani leaders in 2021 described the US-Pakistan relationship during the US war in Afghanistan as lopsided because the US expected more than Pakistan was able to contribute, while American leaders called Pakistan duplicitous and alleged that the country provided safe havens to terrorists. Pakistan struggled with a Taliban insurgency on its soil from the mid-2000s onwards that cost the country more than 83,000 lives and suffered the loss of more than 150 billion USD. Nevertheless, many US officials were unsupportive of Pakistan's role in the US war in Afghanistan, accusing the country of supporting terrorists, which led to a significant deterioration in the US-Pakistan relationship. By 2021, President Biden announced an unconditional withdrawal of US forces and the two countries found themselves at an impasse as the US war in Afghanistan winding down.

However, the two countries seem to have reached an alignment in terms of envisioning a peaceful Afghanistan. This opened space to redefine the US-Pakistan relationship from a patron-client state relationship, which the US-Pakistan has been reduced to, to a bona fide strategic partnership that both countries have the potential to build. Shifting dynamics including the US-China tensions, the simmering Kashmir dispute and the impact of the global pandemic have changed the region and the world. Given the context, there is a strong likelihood that a redefined US-Pakistan partnership may emerge. In a post-pandemic world, it would be in the benefit of both countries to take a renewed look at an old relationship.

⁴ As per the Indian stance, Kashmir is a bilateral issue to be resolved between India and Pakistan.