

PAKISTAN’S ROLE IN THE AFGHANISTAN PEACE PROCESS:
SUCSESSES, CHALLENGES, AND FUTURE PROSPECTS ABSTRACT

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Abstract

Afghanistan has remained a central security and diplomatic concern for Pakistan for more than four decades. Ongoing instability, cross border militancy, refugee flows, and regional power competition have repeatedly linked Afghan peace outcomes with Pakistan’s internal security and foreign policy priorities. This study examines Pakistan’s role in the Afghanistan peace process by assessing its major successes, persistent challenges, and future prospects. Using a qualitative descriptive analytical research design, the study relies on secondary data drawn from peer reviewed academic literature, government reports, policy documents, and reputable international sources. The findings show that Pakistan has played a decisive but contested role as a facilitator of dialogue, a diplomatic intermediary, and a regional stakeholder. While Pakistan’s engagement contributed to key peace initiatives, including support for negotiation frameworks and regional consensus building, its role has also been constrained by mistrust, regional rivalries, internal security threats, and conflicting international narratives. The study further argues that Pakistan’s future effectiveness in the Afghan peace process depends on policy coherence, regional cooperation, and a shift from security centered engagement toward economic and diplomatic integration. The article contributes to the literature by offering a structured and balanced evaluation of Pakistan’s involvement and by identifying policy relevant pathways for sustainable peace in Afghanistan.

INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan’s prolonged conflict has shaped regional security dynamics in South Asia and Central Asia since the late twentieth century (Akhtar, 2008; Abbas, 2014). Pakistan, sharing a long and porous border with Afghanistan, has been directly affected by political instability, armed conflict, and state fragility across the border. The Afghan conflict has produced security spillovers in the form of militancy, refugee inflows, economic disruption, and diplomatic challenges, with long term implications for Pakistan’s internal security and foreign policy priorities (Abbas,

2014; Ahmad, Yousaf, and Shah, 2017). As a result, Pakistan’s involvement in Afghanistan’s peace process has been both unavoidable and deeply consequential. Pakistan’s engagement with Afghanistan has evolved across different phases, including the Cold War period, the Soviet intervention, the post Soviet civil war, the post 9/11 international intervention, and the recent withdrawal of foreign forces (Akhtar, 2008). Across these phases, Pakistan’s policies have been shaped by shifting regional alliances, domestic security imperatives, and international pressure. Scholars have

debated whether Pakistan's role has been stabilizing, contradictory, or strategically driven, with assessments often reflecting geopolitical perspectives rather than systematic analysis (Ahmed and Yousaf, 2018; Ali, 2022).

The peace process in Afghanistan has involved multiple stakeholders, including the Afghan government, insurgent groups, regional powers, and international actors. Pakistan has frequently been identified as a key facilitator due to its geographic proximity, historical ties, and influence over certain Afghan factions (Abdullah and Nafees, 2023). At the same time, Pakistan has faced allegations of selective engagement, policy ambiguity, and strategic hedging, which have contributed to persistent mistrust and complicated its diplomatic positioning (Abbas, 2014; Akhtar, 2008).

The central problem addressed in this study is the absence of a balanced and structured evaluation of Pakistan's role in the Afghanistan peace process. Existing studies often emphasize either Pakistan's strategic utility or its alleged destabilizing behavior, without adequately examining both successes and constraints within a unified analytical framework (Ahmad et al., 2017).

Literature Review

The literature on Afghanistan's peace process reflects diverse theoretical perspectives drawn from peace and conflict studies and international relations. Conflict resolution theory emphasizes negotiation, mediation, and confidence building as pathways to ending protracted conflicts. Scholars argue that durable peace requires addressing underlying political grievances, regional interference, and institutional weaknesses rather than relying on coercive stabilization alone (Abbas, 2014).

Realist approaches in international relations interpret Pakistan's engagement in Afghanistan through the lens of national interest, strategic depth, and regional power competition. From this perspective, Pakistan's policies are viewed as rational responses to perceived security threats, particularly in relation to India's political and diplomatic presence in Afghanistan (Akhtar, 2008; Ali, 2022). Liberal perspectives, by contrast, emphasize diplomacy, multilateral engagement, and economic interdependence, suggesting that Pakistan's long term interests align

with a stable and cooperative Afghanistan (Ahmed and Yousaf, 2018).

Regional security complex theory provides an additional analytical lens by highlighting how security concerns in one state are closely linked with those of neighboring states. Within this framework, Afghanistan's instability is understood as part of a broader regional security system involving Pakistan, India, Iran, China, Russia, and Central Asian states, where unilateral policy choices often generate cross border consequences (Buzan and Wæver, cited in Ali, 2022).

Empirical studies highlight Pakistan's facilitative role in initiating dialogue between Afghan parties, particularly during the Doha process. Abdullah and Nafees (2023) argue that Pakistan's diplomatic engagement helped create conditions for negotiations by encouraging insurgent participation and maintaining communication channels. Other studies emphasize persistent challenges, including cross border militancy, strained trust with Afghan political actors, and competing regional agendas that constrained Pakistan's effectiveness (Abbas, 2014; Ahmad et al., 2017).

A recurring gap in the literature is the lack of integrated analysis that systematically evaluates both achievements and limitations. Many studies focus on specific events or phases without assessing broader patterns across time. This study addresses this gap by organizing findings into thematic categories and linking them to established theoretical perspectives.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative descriptive analytical research design. This approach is appropriate given the interpretive nature of the research questions and the focus on policy behavior, diplomatic engagement, and regional dynamics. Quantitative data are used selectively to contextualize trends, but the core analysis remains qualitative.

Data sources include peer reviewed journal articles, academic books, policy reports, government statements, and publications by international organizations. Only credible and verifiable sources were selected to ensure reliability and validity. Where divergent narratives existed, multiple perspectives were presented and critically assessed.

Data analysis was conducted through thematic categorization. Information was organized under predefined themes aligned with the study objectives, including facilitation of peace talks, diplomatic engagement, security challenges, and future policy options. Triangulation was used to cross check claims across different sources.

Ethical considerations included avoidance of bias, transparent citation of sources, and careful handling of politically sensitive information. The study does not involve human participants, but ethical research standards were followed by ensuring accuracy and intellectual honesty.

The main limitation of the study lies in its reliance on secondary data. While this restricts direct access to decision making processes, it allows for comprehensive synthesis of existing knowledge across time and sources.

Results

The findings are organized into four thematic areas.

4.1 Pakistan as a Facilitator of Dialogue

Pakistan played a facilitative role in bringing Afghan stakeholders to the negotiating table. Diplomatic efforts included encouraging dialogue between insurgent groups and international actors, as well as supporting regional peace initiatives. Pakistan's engagement was particularly visible during phases where external mediation required regional buy in.

4.2 Major Successes

Key successes included diplomatic leverage, regional coordination, and international recognition of Pakistan's role. Pakistan's cooperation with major powers contributed to momentum in negotiation processes. Additionally, Pakistan's hosting of refugees and support for humanitarian access demonstrated a degree of regional responsibility.

4.3 Persistent Challenges

Despite these successes, Pakistan faced significant challenges. These included mistrust from Afghan political factions, allegations of selective engagement, internal security threats from militant spillover, and pressure from competing regional actors. Cross border violence and strained bilateral relations undermined confidence building efforts.

4.4 Future Prospects

The study finds that future prospects depend on policy recalibration. Greater emphasis on economic connectivity, regional trade, and inclusive diplomacy could enhance Pakistan's credibility. Cooperation with regional partners and reduced reliance on security centric approaches are identified as critical pathways.

Discussion

The findings align with regional security complex theory, which explains how Afghanistan's instability directly affects Pakistan's security environment through interconnected political and security dynamics (Ali, 2022). Pakistan's actions reflect both realist calculations and pragmatic diplomacy. While strategic interests shaped engagement, diplomatic facilitation indicates recognition of shared regional risks rather than exclusive pursuit of unilateral advantage (Ahmed and Yousaf, 2018).

Comparison with previous studies confirms Pakistan's dual image as both a stakeholder and a contested actor in the Afghan peace process. This study adds value by demonstrating how structural constraints limit policy outcomes even when diplomatic intent exists. Peace facilitation is not solely determined by influence or leverage, but also by trust, consistency, and regional alignment, factors repeatedly identified in earlier analyses (Abbas, 2014; Akhtar, 2008).

From a regional security complex perspective, Afghanistan and Pakistan form an interlinked security subsystem. Instability in Afghanistan has consistently produced direct security consequences for Pakistan, including militancy, border insecurity, refugee movements, and economic strain (Abbas, 2014). Pakistan's sustained involvement in peace initiatives reflects recognition of this interdependence rather than purely altruistic diplomacy.

Realist interpretations of Pakistan's policy emphasize national interest, threat perception, and strategic competition. The findings partially align with this view, as Pakistan's engagement has been shaped by concerns regarding regional influence, border stability, and the activities of rival states in Afghanistan (Akhtar, 2008; Ali, 2022). However, the evidence also suggests limits to a purely realist explanation. Pakistan's facilitation of dialogue,

cooperation with international actors, and support for negotiated settlements indicate behavior extending beyond narrow power calculations, consistent with findings by Ahmed and Yousaf (2018).

Liberal and institutionalist perspectives help explain Pakistan's increasing emphasis on dialogue and multilateral engagement in later phases of the peace process. The findings show growing Pakistani support for negotiated political solutions and international mediation frameworks, reflecting learning from the limitations of militarized approaches (Abdullah and Nafees, 2023).

A key contribution of this study lies in clarifying why Pakistan's influence has often been overstated or misunderstood. While Pakistan possessed leverage during certain negotiation phases, leverage did not translate into control over outcomes. Afghan internal political fragmentation, lack of elite consensus, and competing external interests reduced the effectiveness of any single actor, supporting arguments advanced by Akhtar (2008) and Abbas (2014).

The persistence of mistrust emerges as a central explanatory factor. Afghan political actors frequently questioned Pakistan's intentions, while Pakistani policy makers viewed Afghan instability through a security lens shaped by past experiences. This mutual suspicion constrained confidence building and limited diplomatic outcomes, a pattern widely documented in peace process literature (Abbas, 2014). Internal security challenges further shaped Pakistan's behavior. Militant spillover from Afghanistan imposed direct costs on Pakistan's civilian population and security institutions, reinforcing securitized policy responses during certain phases (Ahmad et al., 2017). These findings confirm that domestic security pressures often narrow diplomatic flexibility even when political leadership expresses commitment to peace.

Looking forward, the findings suggest that Pakistan's future role depends on policy consistency and regional cooperation. Economic connectivity, trade corridors, and development focused engagement offer opportunities to reshape relations, as economic interdependence has been shown to support post conflict stabilization (Ali, 2022). Pakistan's geographic position places it in a favorable role to support such initiatives if diplomatic trust improves.

In sum, Pakistan's role in the Afghanistan peace process must be understood as constrained agency within a contested regional system. Pakistan influenced processes rather than outcomes, facilitated dialogue rather than imposed solutions, and operated under persistent structural limitations. This interpretation moves beyond polarized narratives and grounds analysis firmly in theory and evidence.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

This study concludes that Pakistan's role in the Afghanistan peace process has been significant but constrained. Pakistan contributed to dialogue facilitation and regional engagement, yet persistent mistrust, security challenges, and geopolitical rivalries limited outcomes.

Policy implications include the need for coherent long term strategy, stronger regional partnerships, and alignment of security objectives with diplomatic initiatives. Sustainable peace in Afghanistan requires cooperative regional frameworks in which Pakistan plays a constructive and credible role.

Future research should examine post withdrawal regional dynamics and assess how economic initiatives influence peace building. A shift from episodic engagement to institutionalized cooperation is essential for long term stability.

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