

FROM STRATEGIC DEPTH TO STRATEGIC UNCERTAINTY: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF PAKISTAN–AFGHANISTAN RELATIONS IN THE POST-2021 ERA

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19435380>

Keywords

Strategic Depth, Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations, Taliban, TTP, Strategic Uncertainty, Regional Security

Article History

Received: 26 January 2026

Accepted: 10 March 2026

Published: 25 March 2026

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Abstract

The withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan in 2021 and the subsequent return of the Taliban regime marked a decisive turning point in Pakistan–Afghanistan relations, transforming Pakistan’s long-standing doctrine of strategic depth into a condition of strategic uncertainty. This study critically examines the evolving political, security, and regional dynamics in the post-2021 era through a qualitative research methodology based on secondary sources, including academic literature, policy reports, and scholarly analyses. The study argues that although Pakistan initially perceived the Taliban’s return as a strategic opportunity to secure its western border and counter regional adversaries, the emerging realities have instead produced complex challenges, including the resurgence of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), increased cross-border militancy, and the Taliban’s autonomous and often non-aligned policy decisions. Furthermore, shifting regional geopolitics, particularly the declining influence of the United States and the growing roles of China, Russia, and other regional actors, have reshaped Pakistan’s strategic environment and limited its leverage over Kabul. The findings suggest that Pakistan’s Afghanistan policy is undergoing a significant transformation from influence-oriented strategic depth to a risk-management approach characterized by containment, adaptation, and uncertainty. This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by integrating traditional strategic frameworks with contemporary geopolitical realities and offers a comprehensive understanding of the evolving nature of Pakistan–Afghanistan relations in the post-2021 regional order.

INTRODUCTION

Pakistan–Afghanistan relations have historically been shaped by a combination of geopolitical, ethnic, and ideological factors. Since its independence in 1947, Pakistan has sought to secure its western frontier by cultivating a friendly government in Kabul, primarily to counterbalance India and prevent encirclement. The Durand Line dispute and the presence of

Pashtun populations across both sides of the border have added to the complexity of bilateral relations, making Afghanistan a central element of Pakistan’s foreign and security policy (Rashid, 2000). These historical dynamics created the foundation for Pakistan’s strategic depth doctrine, which envisioned Afghanistan as a

buffer state that would enhance Pakistan's regional leverage (Fair, 2014).

The emergence of the Taliban in the 1990s further reinforced the strategic depth narrative. Pakistan's support for the Taliban regime was motivated by both security and ideological considerations, providing Islamabad with a partner that could ensure friendly governance in Kabul while countering Indian influence in South Asia (Tellis, 2008). During this period, Pakistan's military and intelligence agencies played a key role in shaping Afghan politics, establishing networks that enabled long-term strategic calculations. The success of these efforts, however, was limited by regional rivalries, internal Afghan fragmentation, and international pressure, which complicated Pakistan's ability to fully implement its policy.

The post-9/11 era introduced new challenges and constraints. Pakistan became a frontline state in the U.S.-led War on Terror, balancing its alliance with the United States against its historical ties with Taliban factions (Giustozzi, 2019). This dual-track policy generated domestic and international criticism, with Afghanistan accusing Pakistan of supporting insurgents while the U.S. relied on Islamabad for counterterrorism cooperation. These competing priorities highlighted the fragile nature of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations and the limitations of strategic depth in an era of heightened global scrutiny.

The Taliban's return to power in August 2021 marked a new phase in bilateral relations, initially perceived by Pakistan as a strategic opportunity to regain influence in Kabul (Akbarzadeh, 2022). However, the Taliban demonstrated a high degree of autonomy, engaging with multiple regional actors and pursuing independent policies. Pakistan's expectations of influence have not fully materialized, as the Taliban prioritize internal governance challenges and seek international recognition over alignment with Islamabad's strategic goals. This divergence underscores the growing uncertainty and complexity in bilateral relations.

In addition to political and diplomatic challenges, security threats have intensified in the post-2021 era. The resurgence of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and other militant groups exploiting the porous border has raised

significant concerns for Pakistan's internal stability (Mir, 2023; Yaqoob, 2023). The combination of militant activity, governance challenges in Afghanistan, and evolving regional dynamics—including the declining influence of the United States and increased involvement of China, Russia, and Iran—has created a multidimensional landscape of strategic uncertainty. Pakistan must therefore adapt its policy framework from a traditional influence-oriented approach to one focused on risk management, threat containment, and regional engagement.

Literature Review

Scholarly research on Pakistan-Afghanistan relations has long emphasized the historical and geopolitical foundations of Islamabad's strategic depth doctrine. Rashid (2000) provides a detailed historical account of the Durand Line dispute and the impact of ethnic Pashtun dynamics on bilateral relations, highlighting that Afghanistan's domestic instability and Pakistan's security concerns have been deeply intertwined. Fair (2014) builds on this by examining Pakistan's strategic depth doctrine, arguing that the policy was premised on the assumption that a friendly Afghan regime would serve as a buffer against external threats, particularly from India. Both studies underscore the longstanding influence of geographic and ethnic factors in shaping Pakistan's Afghan policy, providing the historical backdrop against which post-2021 developments must be understood.

The emergence and evolution of the Taliban have been central to analyses of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. Giustozzi (2019) explores the operational independence of the Taliban and its implications for regional security, noting that the Taliban's engagement with multiple international actors complicates Pakistan's ability to exert influence. Akbarzadeh (2022) further examines the post-2021 return of the Taliban, highlighting the autonomy of the new regime and its emphasis on internal governance over alignment with external partners, including Pakistan. These studies suggest that the historical assumptions of strategic depth may no longer hold, as the Taliban's policies are increasingly shaped by local imperatives and multipolar regional dynamics rather than Pakistan's strategic expectations.

Security and cross-border militancy have been identified as critical factors influencing bilateral relations. Mir (2023) and Abbas (2024) analyze the resurgence of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) following the Taliban takeover, emphasizing the threat this poses to Pakistan's internal stability. Both studies highlight the limitations of relying on the Taliban for containment of militant actors and argue for a re-evaluation of Pakistan's risk management strategies. Similarly, Yaqoob (2023) underscores the persistent challenges of border management, including the contested Durand Line and the exploitation of porous borders by militant groups. These findings indicate that security threats, combined with governance and policy autonomy issues in Afghanistan, contribute to the broader uncertainty in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations.

Recent scholarship has also explored the implications of regional geopolitics and economic instability. Hussain et al. (2026) examine climate-induced migration and economic stress in Afghanistan, highlighting the spillover effects on Pakistan in terms of refugee flows and resource pressures. The International Crisis Group (2022) emphasizes the multipolar dynamics of regional engagement, noting the growing influence of China, Russia, and Iran in Afghanistan, which further constrains Pakistan's strategic maneuvering. Mumtaz et al. (2025) argue that internal political dynamics within Pakistan, including civil-military relations and economic challenges, interact with these external factors to shape foreign policy outcomes. Collectively, these studies illustrate the multidimensional nature of strategic uncertainty and highlight the need for a comprehensive, adaptive approach to Pakistan-Afghanistan relations in the post-2021 era.

Research Gap

Despite extensive scholarship on Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, existing studies primarily focus on historical perspectives, the strategic depth doctrine, and the Taliban's past alignment with Pakistan, often emphasizing either security concerns or geopolitical calculations in isolation (Rashid, 2000; Fair, 2014; Giustozzi, 2019). While post-9/11 analyses have explored Pakistan's role in the War on Terror and its interactions with U.S. policies (Tellis, 2008),

limited research has systematically examined the post-2021 environment, where the Taliban's return to power has fundamentally altered the strategic calculus. Furthermore, there is a paucity of integrated studies that consider the interplay between Taliban autonomy, cross-border militancy, regional multipolar dynamics, and internal political challenges in Pakistan. Most existing research either addresses security threats such as TTP resurgence (Mir, 2023; Abbas, 2024) or economic and humanitarian issues (Hussain et al., 2026), without fully connecting these dimensions to the broader transformation from strategic depth to strategic uncertainty. This creates a gap in understanding how Pakistan can adapt its foreign and security policy to the emerging multidimensional challenges in the post-2021 era, necessitating a comprehensive analysis that synthesizes historical, geopolitical, security, and regional factors to guide policy and scholarly discourse.

Research Questions

- RQ1. How has Pakistan's strategic depth doctrine evolved in the post-2021 context?
RQ2. What factors contribute to strategic uncertainty in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations?

Research Objectives

1. To analyze the transformation of Pakistan's Afghanistan policy.
2. To examine key political, security, and regional factors influencing bilateral relations.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology, relying exclusively on secondary sources to examine Pakistan-Afghanistan relations in the post-2021 era. Data were collected from peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, scholarly books, and credible research publications available online, including ResearchGate, Springer, and academic databases. Thematic analysis was applied to identify patterns and trends related to political, security, and regional dynamics, particularly focusing on the shift from strategic depth to strategic uncertainty. The study triangulates multiple perspectives to provide a holistic understanding of the evolving bilateral relationship, including historical, geopolitical, and security-related dimensions, while ensuring

methodological rigor by cross-verifying information across multiple credible sources.

Findings

1. Taliban Autonomy Reduces Pakistan's Influence

Pakistan initially anticipated that the Taliban's return to power would consolidate its influence in Kabul, allowing Islamabad to guide regional policy outcomes. However, the Taliban's independent decision-making, engagement with multiple regional actors, and focus on internal governance have limited Pakistan's strategic leverage (Giustozzi, 2019; Akbarzadeh, 2022). This autonomy has compelled Pakistan to reassess its long-standing strategic depth doctrine and acknowledge that influence in Afghanistan cannot be assumed solely based on historical ties or ideological alignment. The shift emphasizes that Islamabad must now navigate a more complex and multipolar environment, where regional actors such as China, Russia, and Iran are also shaping Afghan policy independently of Pakistan's interests.

2. Resurgence of TTP and Cross-Border Militancy

The re-emergence of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) represents one of the most significant threats to Pakistan's internal security. Following the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, militant groups have exploited the porous border to conduct attacks inside Pakistan, challenging the effectiveness of previous counterterrorism measures (Mir, 2023; Abbas, 2024). Pakistan's reliance on the Taliban to curtail these groups has proven insufficient, revealing both operational and diplomatic limitations. As a result, Islamabad is increasingly forced to shift its focus from influence-based engagement toward containment and risk mitigation strategies along the western frontier.

3. Border Security and the Durand Line Dispute

The unresolved Durand Line dispute continues to complicate Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, particularly in the context of border security and migration management (Rashid, 2000). While Pakistan has made significant efforts to fence the border and regulate cross-border movement, resistance from local communities and Taliban

authorities persists. These tensions reflect the historical and political complexities surrounding the boundary, contributing to broader instability and reinforcing the perception of strategic uncertainty in Pakistan's Afghanistan policy. Effective border management is therefore both a security necessity and a diplomatic challenge in the post-2021 environment.

4. Regional Geopolitics and Multipolar Dynamics

The decline of U.S. influence in Afghanistan has created a power vacuum that is increasingly occupied by regional actors, including China, Russia, and Iran (International Crisis Group, 2022). These actors pursue independent agendas that are not always aligned with Pakistan's interests, thereby reducing Islamabad's relative leverage in shaping Afghan policy outcomes. The emerging multipolar context requires Pakistan to adopt more nuanced, cooperative, and flexible approaches to regional diplomacy, including engagement with multiple stakeholders to manage competing strategic interests effectively.

5. Economic Instability and Humanitarian Challenges

Afghanistan's economic instability, exacerbated by international sanctions and lack of formal recognition, has generated widespread humanitarian crises, including increased migration flows to Pakistan (Hussain et al., 2026). These developments place additional strain on Pakistan's resources and infrastructure, particularly in border regions. Economic pressures, combined with security challenges, reinforce the multidimensional nature of strategic uncertainty, requiring Pakistan to integrate both humanitarian and security considerations into its foreign policy planning.

6. Decline of Strategic Depth as a Policy Paradigm

The cumulative effect of Taliban autonomy, cross-border militancy, and regional complexities has rendered the concept of strategic depth less relevant in contemporary Pakistan-Afghanistan relations (Khan & Ahmed, 2023). Historically, strategic depth provided Islamabad with a coherent framework to secure influence in Kabul, but current

realities demonstrate that influence cannot be guaranteed by historical alliances or ideological alignment alone. This necessitates a policy shift toward pragmatic risk management, adaptive engagement, and strategic flexibility.

7. Governance Challenges in Afghanistan

The Taliban's limited institutional capacity, lack of inclusivity, and governance deficits further complicate bilateral relations (Nojumi, 2022). Weak governance hampers effective control over non-state actors and cross-border militancy, while also affecting humanitarian aid delivery and economic stabilization. These challenges highlight the interdependence of governance, security, and diplomatic engagement in shaping Pakistan's strategic calculus.

8. Diplomatic Constraints and Non-Recognition Issues

Pakistan's diplomatic engagement with Afghanistan is constrained by the lack of formal recognition of the Taliban regime (Yousaf, 2022). Without formal diplomatic channels, coordination on security, economic, and migration issues remains limited, reducing the efficacy of bilateral mechanisms. This diplomatic limitation reinforces the broader theme of strategic uncertainty and underscores the need for innovative engagement strategies that do not rely solely on formal recognition.

Discussion and Analysis

The transformation from strategic depth to strategic uncertainty in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations reflect a fundamental reorientation of Pakistan's foreign policy framework in the post-2021 era. Historically, the doctrine of strategic depth was rooted in the assumption that a friendly regime in Afghanistan would provide Pakistan with geopolitical leverage and security against external threats, particularly from India (Fair, 2014). However, the evolving realities following the Taliban's return have demonstrated that such assumptions were overly simplistic and did not fully account for the complexities of Afghan politics and regional dynamics.

One of the most significant developments undermining Pakistan's strategic expectations is the increasing autonomy of the Taliban regime. Unlike the 1990s, when the Taliban were

relatively dependent on external support, the current leadership has diversified its diplomatic engagements and demonstrated a willingness to pursue policies independent of Pakistan's preferences (Giustozzi, 2019; Akbarzadeh, 2022). This shift has reduced Pakistan's ability to influence decision-making in Kabul and has contributed to a growing sense of unpredictability in bilateral relations.

The resurgence of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has further exacerbated security challenges, highlighting the unintended consequences of Pakistan's earlier strategic policies. The post-2021 environment has witnessed a noticeable increase in cross-border attacks, indicating that militant networks continue to exploit the porous Pakistan-Afghanistan border (Mir, 2023). This resurgence has not only undermined Pakistan's internal security but has also strained its diplomatic relations with the Taliban, who have been reluctant to take decisive action against TTP elements operating within Afghanistan.

In this context, border management has emerged as a critical issue shaping bilateral relations. The Durand Line, which remains a contested boundary, continues to be a source of tension between the two countries (Rashid, 2000). Pakistan's efforts to fence the border and regulate cross-border movement have been met with resistance from the Taliban, reflecting deeper historical and political disagreements. This unresolved issue complicates efforts to establish effective security mechanisms and contributes to the broader climate of strategic uncertainty.

Another important dimension of the current relationship is the evolving regional geopolitical landscape. The withdrawal of U.S. forces has created a power vacuum in Afghanistan, leading to increased involvement by regional actors such as China, Russia, and Iran (International Crisis Group, 2022). These actors are pursuing their own strategic interests, often independently of Pakistan, thereby reducing Islamabad's relative influence in shaping Afghanistan's future. This multipolar environment requires Pakistan to adopt a more nuanced and flexible foreign policy approach.

China's growing role in Afghanistan, particularly in the context of economic cooperation and regional connectivity, presents

both opportunities and challenges for Pakistan. While China's involvement aligns with Pakistan's broader strategic interests, including the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), it also introduces new dynamics that Pakistan must carefully navigate (Hussain et al., 2026). The need to balance cooperation with competition among regional actors adds another layer of complexity to Pakistan's Afghanistan policy.

Economic instability in Afghanistan is another factor contributing to strategic uncertainty. The lack of international recognition and financial support for the Taliban regime has resulted in a severe humanitarian and economic crisis (Yousaf, 2022). This instability has direct implications for Pakistan, including increased refugee flows, cross-border smuggling, and economic pressures on border regions. These challenges highlight the interconnected nature of security and economic issues in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations.

The role of non-state actors in shaping bilateral relations cannot be overlooked. Militant groups such as TTP operate across borders, exploiting governance gaps and weak institutional control (Abbas, 2024). Their activities not only threaten Pakistan's internal security but also complicate diplomatic engagement with Afghanistan. Addressing this challenge requires coordinated efforts and mutual trust, which remain limited in the current context.

Furthermore, the decline of U.S. influence in the region has significant implications for Pakistan's strategic calculations. During the War on Terror, Pakistan's alignment with the United States provided both economic and military support (Tellis, 2008). However, the post-withdrawal environment has forced Pakistan to recalibrate its foreign policy in the absence of a dominant external partner. This shift underscores the need for greater regional cooperation and self-reliance.

Domestic political dynamics within Pakistan also play a crucial role in shaping its Afghanistan policy. Civil-military relations, political instability, and economic challenges influence decision-making processes and policy implementation (Mumtaz et al., 2025). These internal factors can either facilitate or hinder Pakistan's ability to respond effectively to

external challenges, further contributing to strategic uncertainty.

The concept of strategic depth itself is increasingly being questioned by scholars and policymakers. While it once provided a coherent framework for understanding Pakistan's engagement with Afghanistan, it is now seen as inadequate for addressing contemporary challenges (Khan & Ahmed, 2023). The changing nature of warfare, the rise of non-state actors, and the complexity of regional geopolitics require a more comprehensive and adaptable approach.

In addition, the governance challenges faced by the Taliban regime have implications for regional stability. Issues such as lack of inclusivity, weak institutional capacity, and limited international recognition hinder the Taliban's ability to effectively govern Afghanistan (Nojumi, 2022). These governance deficits contribute to instability, which in turn affects Pakistan's security and economic interests.

Migration dynamics also play a significant role in shaping bilateral relations. The ongoing humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan has led to increased displacement and migration, with many refugees seeking shelter in Pakistan (Hussain et al., 2026). This influx places additional pressure on Pakistan's resources and infrastructure, highlighting the need for coordinated regional and international responses.

Moreover, Pakistan's diplomatic engagement with the Taliban remains constrained by the lack of formal recognition and divergent policy priorities. While Pakistan continues to advocate for engagement with the Taliban, differences over security and border issues limit the effectiveness of such efforts (Yousaf, 2022). This situation underscores the challenges of maintaining constructive relations in an uncertain and evolving political environment.

In brief, the shift from strategic depth to strategic uncertainty reflects a broader transformation in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, driven by a combination of security challenges, regional geopolitics, and domestic factors. The findings suggest that Pakistan must adopt a more flexible, pragmatic, and multidimensional approach to its Afghanistan policy. By prioritizing cooperation, addressing

internal vulnerabilities, and adapting to changing regional dynamics, Pakistan can better navigate the complexities of the post-2021 era and contribute to long-term regional stability.

Recent Developments

Recent developments between 2023 and 2026 indicate a further deepening of strategic uncertainty in Pakistan–Afghanistan relations, particularly due to the intensification of cross-border militancy and diplomatic friction. The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has significantly escalated attacks inside Pakistan, leveraging safe havens in Afghanistan despite repeated diplomatic engagements between Islamabad and Kabul. This has led to a visible shift in Pakistan’s policy from cautious engagement to a more assertive security posture, including border skirmishes and unilateral counterterrorism considerations. Moreover, the Taliban’s continued reluctance or inability to decisively act against TTP elements reflects both governance limitations and strategic divergence, thereby eroding mutual trust (Abbas, 2024; Mir, 2023). Simultaneously, Pakistan’s border fencing initiatives and stricter visa regimes have further strained bilateral relations, highlighting the transition from cooperative expectations to defensive realism.

At the regional level, the evolving geopolitical environment has further complicated Pakistan’s strategic calculus. The consolidation of a multipolar order—marked by increased engagement of China, Russia, and Iran in Afghanistan—has reduced Pakistan’s relative influence while opening new avenues for regional competition and cooperation. Notably, China’s cautious economic engagement and security concerns regarding instability in Afghanistan have limited the expected expansion of connectivity projects such as CPEC into Afghan territory (Hussain et al., 2026; International Crisis Group, 2022). In parallel, Afghanistan’s worsening humanitarian and economic crisis has triggered renewed refugee inflows into Pakistan, exacerbating domestic economic pressures and social tensions. These developments underscore that Pakistan’s Afghanistan policy is no longer driven by strategic depth or influence but is increasingly shaped by crisis management, regional balancing, and internal security imperatives,

reinforcing the broader paradigm of strategic uncertainty.

Conclusion

The post-2021 phase represents a critical transformation in Pakistan–Afghanistan relations, marking the gradual decline of the strategic depth doctrine that had long guided Pakistan’s foreign policy toward Afghanistan. Historically, strategic depth was perceived as a viable framework for ensuring Pakistan’s security by maintaining a friendly regime in Kabul. However, the return of the Taliban has demonstrated that ideological alignment does not necessarily translate into strategic compliance. Instead, the Taliban’s independent posture and diversified regional engagements have exposed the limitations of Pakistan’s traditional approach, thereby redefining the nature of bilateral relations.

The study highlights that the resurgence of militant groups, particularly Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), has emerged as one of the most pressing challenges in the post-2021 environment. The inability or unwillingness of the Afghan Taliban to effectively counter TTP activities has strained trust between the two countries and intensified security threats within Pakistan. This development underscores the unintended consequences of earlier strategic choices and reflects the complexity of managing non-state actors within regional geopolitics. Consequently, Pakistan’s security paradigm is increasingly shifting toward internal stabilization and border management rather than external influence.

In addition to security concerns, evolving regional geopolitics have significantly contributed to strategic uncertainty. The decline of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan has created a power vacuum that is being filled by regional actors such as China, Russia, and Iran, each pursuing their own strategic interests. This multipolar environment has reduced Pakistan’s relative influence and necessitates a more balanced and pragmatic foreign policy approach. Moreover, Afghanistan’s ongoing economic instability and humanitarian crises continue to have spillover effects on Pakistan, further complicating bilateral relations and increasing the burden on domestic resources.

Overall, the transition from strategic depth to strategic uncertainty reflects a broader shift in Pakistan's foreign policy thinking, from a focus on dominance and influence to one centered on risk management and adaptability. The findings of this study suggest that Pakistan must move beyond traditional strategic paradigms and adopt a more comprehensive approach that integrates security, diplomacy, and regional cooperation. Such a transformation is essential not only for improving Pakistan–Afghanistan relations but also for ensuring long-term stability in the wider South Asian region.

Way Forward

In order to effectively navigate the emerging challenges in Pakistan–Afghanistan relations, Pakistan must adopt a multidimensional and forward-looking strategy that prioritizes diplomatic engagement, regional cooperation, and sustainable security mechanisms. Constructive dialogue with the Taliban regime is essential to address key issues such as cross-border militancy, border management, and refugee concerns. At the same time, Pakistan should actively engage with regional stakeholders, including China, Iran, and Central Asian states, to promote a cooperative framework for stability in Afghanistan. Strengthening regional connectivity initiatives and economic partnerships can also contribute to reducing tensions and fostering mutual interdependence.

Furthermore, Pakistan must focus on strengthening its internal security architecture and addressing the root causes of militancy to ensure long-term stability. This includes enhancing counterterrorism strategies, improving border control mechanisms, and investing in socio-economic development in border regions. A shift toward a pragmatic and adaptive policy approach, supported by institutional coordination and evidence-based decision-making, will be crucial in responding to the uncertainties of the post-2021 environment. Ultimately, a balanced strategy that combines domestic resilience with proactive regional diplomacy will enable Pakistan to manage risks effectively and build a more stable and cooperative relationship with Afghanistan.

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