

PAKISTAN-AFGHANISTAN RELATIONS: A CASE STUDY OF AFGHAN REFUGEES IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract

Pakistan's relationship with Afghanistan is complex, characterized by phases of cooperation, conflict, and significant socio-economic impacts, particularly concerning the arrival of Afghan refugees into Pakistan. The entrance of Afghan refugees into Pakistan began in the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, out of 5 million refugees 1.5 million seeking refuge from violence, conflict, and oppressive regimes. This research explores Afghanistan-Pakistan relations: A case study of Afghan refugees in Pakistan. Furthermore, this research also focuses on the current nature of Pak-Afghan relations, the reasons of departing Afghan refugees from Pakistan and its impact on Pakistan's economy. The researcher has used the method of documentary Analysis to answer the research questions. In documentary Analysis we study the available materials including books, articles, newspapers, audio, video recording, interviews, policy documents, TV channels, and social media forums to get more information about the topic to analyse our problem. The researcher has applied the theory of realism to analyse Afghanistan-Pakistan relation. It emphasizes the anarchic nature of the international system, where there is no higher authority to enforce rules, leading to competition and conflict among states. In this situation a state must think about its survival which is only possible through self-help.

INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan and Pakistan have strong connections because of shared religion, ethnicity, and culture. However, political issues and power struggles in the region have often created tension between them. Pakistan's foreign policy toward Afghanistan has been shaped by its long-standing rivalry with India, internal problems at home, and difficult ties with different Afghan governments over time. Pakistan was among the first countries to welcome the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, with then Prime Minister Imran Khan stating that Afghans had broken the shackles of slavery. However, despite early support, Pakistan has not officially recognized the Taliban government. It is taking a careful approach, considering global concerns and the

Taliban's difficulties in running the country. The situation is made more complex by the Durand Line, the official border between the two countries, which Afghanistan has long refused to accept. This has caused border disputes and tensions. Pakistan's relationship with Afghanistan is complicated, marked by periods of cooperation and conflict, and has had major social and economic effects, especially due to the large number of Afghan refugees in Pakistan.

The large arrival of Afghan refugees in Pakistan began after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, as millions fled violence, war, and oppressive rule. This study explores the relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan by focusing on Afghan

refugees as a case study. It also looks at current aspects of their relations, reasons why Afghan refugees are now leaving Pakistan, and how this affects Pakistan's economy. The researcher has employed the methodology of documentary analysis to address the research inquiries. The researcher has utilized a qualitative approach to documentary analysis. In documentary analysis, one scrutinizes the extant materials, including books, articles, newspapers, audio and video recordings, interviews, policy documents, television broadcasts, and social media platforms, to garner additional insights regarding the topic in order to analyze the identified issue. The researcher has applied the theory of realism to interpret Afghanistan-Pakistan relations, which underscores the anarchic disposition of the international system, wherein no overarching authority is present to enforce regulations, resulting in competition and conflict among states. In this context, a state must prioritize its survival, which is achievable solely through self-reliance.

Background of the study

Afghan refugees have played a major role in shaping Afghanistan-Pakistan relations for over forty years. The large-scale migration began after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and continued through later conflicts, making Pakistan one of the top countries hosting refugees. Their presence has had deep social, economic, political, and security impacts on both countries.

History of Afghan Refugee Migration

Afghan migration to Pakistan began after the Saur Revolution in 1978 and intensified with the Soviet intervention in 1979. Multiple waves have occurred since, driven by ongoing conflict, ethnic ties, and geographical proximity. Millions of Afghans have sought refuge in Pakistan since the 1980s, with estimates of up to 5 million at the peak and around 1.3–1.4 million still residing in Pakistan today (Ghosh, 2019).

Pakistan's response to Afghan refugees has shifted over time, influenced by domestic pressures, international relations, and changing security dynamics. The influx of refugees has placed significant pressure on Pakistan's resources, infrastructure, and economy, particularly in regions

like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) (Khan, A Khan, & Khan, 2021).

Refugee The presence of Afghan refugees in Pakistan has been linked to rising militancy, social tensions, and security issues, affecting Pakistan's stability and its policy toward Afghanistan. While refugees have added to the labor force, they also face problems in getting jobs, education, and basic services. Women, in particular, often face challenges that are ignored in development plans. Sending refugees back to Afghanistan is a sensitive issue, affected by security, international rules, and human rights. Some recent policies have included forced returns, raising concerns about whether they meet global standards. The refugee issue is closely connected to peace and development in the region. Working together, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the international community, is key to finding long-term solutions. Over time, Afghan refugees in Pakistan have developed unique identities due to war, long displacement, and changing government policies. Their integration and status in society are still complicated (Abbas, 2005).

Afghanistan continues to face one of the world's largest and longest-running refugee crises, under the care of the UNHCR. Afghan refugees are the second-largest group after Syrians, with about one in four Afghans having been displaced. Even after more than 30 years, this crisis remains unresolved. While Afghan refugees are spread across over 70 countries, around 95% live in Pakistan and Iran. Ongoing war and instability in Afghanistan have led to a steady flow of people seeking asylum, along with many being displaced within the country itself (UNHCR, 2023). Afghans began moving to Pakistan even before the Soviet invasion in 1979. Traditionally, they crossed the border to visit family, trade, find work, or escape poverty and drought. After the Saur Revolution in 1978, many fled to Pakistan, but the first major wave came after the Soviet invasion in 1979. During that time, more than six million Afghans became refugees. Although Pakistan is not a signatory to the Geneva Convention on Refugees, it welcomed these refugees. At one point, Pakistan hosted five million Afghan refugees, about 21% of the world's refugee population, making it the second-largest refugee-hosting country. In 1981, there were about 1.5 million Afghan refugees in

Pakistan, rising to nearly five million by 1986. Most were Pashtuns, but there were also Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras. Because of shared culture, language, religion, and ethnicity, many Afghan refugees were able to integrate into Pakistani society and lived relatively peacefully (UNHCR, UNHCR, 2022).

Most Afghan refugees in Pakistan settled in the Pashtun belt, mainly Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), the former FATA, and Balochistan, where camps were established and managed by UNHCR, CCAR, and SAFRON. Today, 62% live in KP and FATA, and 20% in Balochistan. Refugees received basic services in camps, but unlike in Iran, they were free to move, work, study, rent homes, and travel across Pakistan. Many later moved to urban areas and became active in informal sectors like transport, often bypassing legal restrictions (UNHCR, UNHCR, 2023). Over time, Afghan communities spread throughout Pakistan, including Punjab, Sindh, Gilgit-Baltistan, and Azad Jammu & Kashmir. Currently, 67% of Afghan refugees live in urban or rural areas, while 33% remain in camps. Following the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, hopes for refugee repatriation rose, but most stayed. After the mujahideen's 1992 victory, around 1.5 million returned, though fresh instability and Taliban rule led to further displacement. Additional waves came due to drought in 2000 and continued conflict, including post-2001. From 2002 to 2015, about 3.8 million returned under UNHCR programs, but instability persisted, driving new refugee inflows, such as the 160,000 arrivals in 2011. Ongoing conflict in Afghanistan remains the key reason for the continued refugee presence in Pakistan (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

Problem Statement

Like any new research the present study also had to face some challenges, mainly due to its dependence on human supply of information and the strong possibility of partisanship implicated in a human source. The suspicion of the information and the facts and figures regarding the Pak-Afghan relations is considered. In order to rectify such weaknesses historiographic lens and both primary and secondary sources accessible on the theme is considered. Resultantly, this thesis fills in the cracks and gaps in the published accounts of Pakistan

Afghan relations and the refugee issues. Therefore, this work studies, discuss and analyze Pakistan Afghanistan relations and also evaluates these relations in the framework of security of refugee in Pakistan.

Significance /Justification of the Study

This study is very important in terms of evaluating Pak-Afghanistan relations in historical and current context and highlights those factors which are the main hurdles in the way of a smooth and bilateral relations. Furthermore, it Identifies the reasons of deporting Afghan refugees from Pakistan. Finally, it also discusses the impact of Afghan refugees on Pakistan's economy. This research broadens the horizons of mind of political scientists and it is also helpful for policy making elites.

Research Questions

1. What is the current nature of Afghanistan-Pakistan relations?
2. What are the reasons of deporting Afghan refugees from Pakistan?
3. What is the impact Afghan refugees on Pakistan's economy?

Limitation of the study

This study has some limitations. It was hard to visit refugee camps and talk directly to people because of security and official restrictions, so most information came from books and reports. Language and cultural differences may have affected how well the responses were understood. The study focused on certain refugee groups, which may not reflect the experiences of all Afghan refugees in Pakistan. Political issues made it difficult to get complete and honest information. There wasn't enough time to look at long-term effects, and because the study is based on opinions and not numbers, it can't show exact results. Also, the situation between Pakistan and Afghanistan changes quickly, so some findings may become outdated.

Literature Review

The Geographical and Socio-Cultural Overview of Pakistan

The Islamic Republic of Pakistan is located in South Asia. It shares its borders with India, Afghanistan, Iran, and China. According to the United Nations, Pakistan's total area is approximately 796,095 square kilometers. The length of its borders with neighboring countries includes 2,912 kilometers with India, 2,430 kilometers with Afghanistan, 909 kilometers with Iran, and 523 kilometers with China. In accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (1982), Pakistan claims a 200-nautical-mile exclusive economic zone, 12-nautical-mile territorial waters, and a 24-nautical-mile contiguous zone for immigration, customs, and security matters. Pakistan is home to five major rivers: Indus, Ravi, Chenab, Jhelum, and Sutlej. Its key natural resources include arable land, coal,

natural gas, limestone, iron, salt, and chromite (Ali, 2013).

Ethnic Composition

Pakistan's population is ethnically diverse. The Punjabis form the largest ethnic group, comprising 44.2% of the total population. They are often divided into Jats, Rajputs, and Arain castes. The Pakhtuns (also known as Pashtuns), make up 15.4%, mainly residing in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. They consist of various tribes and lack a central governing authority. Sindhis, primarily found in Sindh province, constitute 14.1% of the population and are grouped into occupational and caste-based communities. The Baloch, who make up 3.6%, are mainly based in Balochistan and are divided into eastern and western tribes. Other ethnic groups include the Siraikis, who are dispersed across multiple regions (Nevers, 2007).



Languages

Urdu is the national language and holds official status. English and Urdu are used for business and governance. Punjabi is the most widely spoken language, used by 44.2% of the population. Other major languages include Pashto (15.2%), Sindhi (14.1%), Siraiki (10.5%), Urdu (7.8%), and Balochi

(3.8%). Smaller linguistic communities include Hindko speakers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Farsi-speaking Hazaras in Balochistan, and Brahui speakers in Balochistan and Sindh (Malik, 2012). Ethnic identity in Pakistan is closely linked with language and region. Although Urdu has been promoted as a unifying language, it is the mother

tongue of only the Muhajir community. Some groups view the national promotion of Urdu as a threat to their ethnic identity, job opportunities, and political rights (Malik, 2012).

Religion

Pakistan is predominantly Muslim, with 96.3% of the population adhering to Islam. Of these, approximately 95% are Sunni, and 5% are Shia. Minor religious communities include Hindus (1.6%), Christians (1.6%), and others such as Sikhs and Bahá'is (0.3%). The Ahmadiyya community, which makes up 0.2%, is not recognized as Muslim under Pakistani law (Ali, 2013).

Historical and Political Background

Since independence in August 1947, Pakistan emerged as a geographically divided state with its

West Wing (Punjab and Sindh) and East Wing (now Bangladesh) separated by over 1,600 kilometers of Indian territory. The country faced major challenges, including absorbing Muslim migrants from India, managing ethnic and economic disparities, and forming an effective government and a sense of national unity (Babar, 2017). The deaths of founding leaders, Muhammad Ali Jinnah (1948) and Liaquat Ali Khan (1951), were followed by periods of political instability marked by short-lived governments, alternating between civilian rule and military coups. Initially, the Constituent Assembly served as the legislative body responsible for drafting a constitution and governing the state until a formal constitution was implemented (Smith, 2017).

Geographical and Ethnic Overview of Afghanistan



Afghanistan celebrates its Independence Day on August 19, commemorating its full autonomy from British influence in 1919. It is a landlocked country located in Central Asia, bordered by Pakistan to the south and east, Iran to the west, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan to the north, and China to the northeast (Fair, 2013). Its total area is slightly smaller than the U.S. state of Texas, and its estimated population is around 35 million (Fair, 2013).

Topography and Climate

Afghanistan is predominantly mountainous, dominated by the Hindu Kush Mountain range,

which stretches from the northeast to the southwest. Nearly half of the country lies above 2,000 meters in elevation, and peaks in the Hindu Kush exceed 7,000 meters. The northeastern mountain ranges along the Pakistan border have historically held great strategic importance (Hamid, 2017). In contrast, the southwestern and north-central parts of the country feature plains and desert regions, including the Dasht-e-Margo and Registan deserts. Major rivers include: Kabul River – 460 km, Harirud – 850 km, Amu Darya – 800 km and Helmand River – 1,000 km.

These rivers serve as vital water sources and geographic markers, including Afghanistan's

northern border near Qonduz and Koshk (Hamid, 2017). Afghanistan experiences a semi-arid to arid continental climate, with cold winters and hot summers. In northeastern highlands, subarctic winters are common, while monsoonal effects from Pakistan can temper temperatures and increase rainfall in the east and central regions.

Environmental Challenges

Afghanistan suffers from severe environmental degradation. The country lacks major bodies of freshwater, and over 50% of the population lacks access to clean water. Pollution from agriculture, industrial runoff, and poor waste management has reduced both water quality and availability. Waterborne diseases are common, and desertification, soil erosion, salinization, and overgrazing have significantly harmed agricultural productivity.

Moreover, ongoing armed conflict has led to the destruction of ecosystems. Landmines and unexploded ordnance remain dangerous, threatening an estimated four million people across 32 provinces. Air pollution from industrial zones in neighboring Iran, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan also affects Afghanistan's northern areas. Northeastern Afghanistan is highly prone to earthquakes, such as the 1998 quake near the Tajikistan border, which killed around 4,000 people (Fair, 2013).

Ethnic and Linguistic Diversity

Afghanistan is ethnically diverse, with the Pashtuns forming the largest ethnic group at 40%, mainly in the south and east. Tajiks constitute 27%, concentrated in the northeast, while Hazaras (9%), Uzbeks, and Aimaks dominate parts of north-central Afghanistan. Other groups include Turkmen (3%), Baloch (2%), and the Kuchis, a nomadic Pashtun community whose numbers have declined significantly since 1979 (Fair, 2013). More than 30 languages are spoken in Afghanistan. Dari, a variety of Persian, is spoken by 50% of the population and serves as a lingua franca, while Pashto is spoken by 35%. Turkic languages account for 11%, and smaller groups speak Pashai and Balochi. Many Afghans are multilingual, using Dari as a second language (Fair, 2013).

Afghanistan–Pakistan Relations:

This overview covers some key issues affecting relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan, focusing on both historical issues, such as the Durand Line, and more recent challenges including cross-border terrorism and the role of India. The Durand Line dispute is a major issue between Afghanistan and Pakistan that predates the 1947 creation of Pakistan. The Durand Line demarcation, completed between 1893 and 1896 (Omrani, 2009), was not accepted by Afghanistan's King Zahir Shah, and since 1947 various Afghan governments have likewise rejected it, arguing that the 1893 treaty was an agreement between "two unequal powers".

Qassem (2007, p. 72) explains the Afghan point of view on the Durand Line: "the [Afghan] argument is that all the Pushtun regions of Pakistan belong to Afghanistan simply because these regions formed part of the erstwhile Durrani Empire and that the Pushtuns form a nation". The underpinning argument by Kabul is that the agreement with the British over the Durand Line expired after 100 years. By contrast, Pakistan regards itself as the successor of the British Empire and claims that the Durand Line had no deadline as claimed by Kabul. The British left the matter of giving back the Pashtun lands to Kabul to the "successor government", Pakistan (Omrani, 2009). It was mainly because of the dispute over the Durand Line that Afghanistan voted against Pakistan joining the United Nations in 1947. Pakistan's first retaliation to Afghanistan's objection to its UN membership was the 1947 trade embargo (Schofield, 2010). This historical baggage continues to haunt bilateral relations, as was witnessed when Kabul opposed the merger of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas with the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in Pakistan in 2018 (Yusufzai, 2018c).

Linked to Afghanistan's differences with Pakistan on the Durand Line demarcation is the issue of Pashtunistan. By rejecting the applicability of the 1893 treaty with the British Raj, Afghanistan lays claim to the territories inhabited by the Pashtuns prior to 1893. Pashtunistan then refers to a territory comprising the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa of Pakistan where most Pashtuns live (Bezhan, 2014). The Pashtunistan issue moved into the background when Afghanistan

was invaded by the Soviet Union in December 1979. This afforded Pakistan an opportunity to revive its relations with the US by becoming part of the US-USSR proxy war in Afghanistan (Ahmed, 2012). Pakistan also used several Afghan refugees' camps as sanctuaries for mujahideen fighting in Afghanistan (Burki, 1986). Without Pakistan's support, "there could have been no Afghan resistance" against the Soviets (Weinbaum, 1991).

Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations After the Soviet Invasion (1979-1996)

On December 27, 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, an act that significantly influenced Pakistan's foreign policy. President Zia-ul-Haq saw this as a geopolitical and ideological threat, especially to Islamic unity. According to Ahmad (2010), Pakistan pursued multiple goals:

- Supporting the Mujahideen resistance
- Weakening Pashtun separatist movements
- Enhancing anti-India sentiments
- Advancing its nuclear program
- Seeking strategic depth against India

Pakistan worked toward a diplomatic resolution, promoting Soviet troop withdrawal, non-intervention guarantees, and the return of Afghan refugees. These efforts gained international support, including from the United States, China, and the Muslim world. Pakistan organized a conference of Islamic foreign ministers, which condemned Soviet aggression and formed a committee with Pakistan, Iran, and the OIC secretary-general to mediate. However, Soviet non-cooperation hindered progress.

The United Nations General Assembly also addressed the issue in January and September 1980, passing resolutions calling for peaceful resolution and Soviet withdrawal (Ahmad, 2010). A major breakthrough came in April 1988 with the Geneva Accords, a historic agreement that facilitated the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. This was a major success in Pakistan's foreign policy and was widely celebrated. According to Jilani (2001), the agreement was significant because it marked the first major military withdrawal by a superpower since the Vietnam War (1964-1975). The Geneva Accords laid the groundwork for the end of Soviet involvement in the Afghan conflict (Europa World

Year Book, 2016). Pakistan's role in Afghanistan during the Soviet invasion can be analyzed in several ways. Firstly, Pakistan's immediate concern was to protect itself against a possible Soviet invasion beyond Afghanistan. Additionally, it was vital for Pakistan to defuse any expansion of communism towards its territory (Akhtar, 2008). Nonetheless, the war next door had an impact on Pakistan, for example through a huge and regular influx of refugees. During the 1980s, Pakistan hosted around five million Afghan refugees (Centlivres & Centlivres-Demont, 1988). The ongoing war in Afghanistan has forced millions across the borders with Iran and Pakistan, with 2.6 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan (Z. S. Ahmed, 2018).

Pakistan's affiliation with and endorsement of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan has affected its image in the eyes of the public in Afghanistan. Before the rise of the Taliban, Pakistan's relations with former Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani and ex-minister of defence, Ahmad Shah Massoud, were already under pressure from the increasing influence of Iran and India on Afghanistan, which was the last thing Pakistan wanted (Akhtar, 2008). After the Taliban took control of Kabul, a significant number of Afghan military elites, including the commander of the Northern Alliance, Massoud, identified Pakistan as an enemy of peace in Afghanistan. While Pakistan supported the Taliban regime in the 1990s, the Northern Alliance received the support of Iran, Russia, India, Turkey and Tajikistan (Barfield, 2010).

Massoud made his position abundantly clear at his appearance before the European Parliament in April 2001, a few months before his assassination (Massoud, 2001). Although the Taliban was working in the interests of Pakistan (Akhtar, 2008), its cooperation with Al-Qaeda created more difficulties for the Taliban. The marriage between the Taliban and Al-Qaeda also became problematic for the White House, which was a strong supporter of several energy projects in Afghanistan, including one designed to deliver Turkmenistan's natural gas to Pakistan (Cucinelli, 2012). Since the September 11 terrorist attacks, India has acted as a major catalyst in fostering further mistrust between Afghanistan and Pakistan. As Pakistan's arch-rival,

India wanted to create insecurities for Pakistan through its greater influence in Afghanistan. Despite its relations with the Taliban and its troubled relationship with the Afghan government, Islamabad had hoped to increase its influence over Kabul too. Competing for influence in Kabul, both India and Pakistan have extended their assistance to Afghanistan's reconstruction, despite various political tensions. In a statement made in 2018, Pakistan ambassador to China, Masood Khalid, said that Pakistan's assistance to Afghanistan had reached US\$1 billion (The Nation, 2018); India pledged US\$3 billion through to 2020 (Roche, 2017). While relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan have been marred by tension and mistrust, India has had more stable relations with almost all Afghan governments than Pakistan, except for a brief period when the Taliban were in power (Ganguly & Howenstein, 2009). To ensure its presence and leverage at the Bonn Conference in 2001, which was held after the US intervention with the purpose of establishing a new government in Kabul, India advanced its relations through financial assistance for Afghanistan's reconstruction, especially in agriculture, health and construction of roads and government buildings (Aid Data, 2016),

but Indian contributions have been treated with suspicion by Pakistan. Since then, Pakistan has accused India of involving itself in Afghanistan against Pakistan's interests, while the Afghan government has been comparably critical of Pakistan's role. In a 2012 interview with the AFP News Agency, former President of Pakistan Pervez Musharraf stated, "they [India] want to create an anti-Pakistan Afghanistan" and "If Indians are using some ethnic groups in Afghanistan, then Pakistan will use its own support, and our ethnic allies are certainly Pashtuns" (cited in Shams, 2014). In an interview, Pakistan's foreign secretary said, "We have seen that India has played a very negative role in Afghanistan vis-à-vis Pakistan, because of its presence along borders, because of the fact that there has been terrorism perpetuated in Pakistan through India, through Afghanistan" (GVS, 2018).

Similarly, Kabul has been vocal on cross-border terrorism from Pakistan. The country's Vice President, Sarwar Danish, criticized the role of

Pakistan, in connection with its support for the Taliban, at the General Assembly session in 2016 (Pant, 2016). This case shows that the conflictual relations between India and Pakistan influence Islamabad's perception of Afghanistan-India cooperation. Thus, the India factor continues to influence Afghanistan-Pakistan relations. The issue of cross-border terrorism has also led to a diplomatic crossfire between Kabul and Islamabad, such as after the terrorist attacks in Kandahar in October 2018. Soon after the incident, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani said, "I want to say that this conspiracy was plotted in Pakistan. So, Pakistan should give us the criminals so that we can bring them to justice" (cited in Baabar, 2018).

In response, Islamabad denied any such involvement. Afghanistan is not the only country with whom Pakistan's relationship has been strained due to allegations of cross-border terrorism. There has been a wider understanding, especially in Kabul and Washington, that Pakistan was not fully committed to the "war on terror" and continued supporting the Taliban, which has been able to attack the coalition forces in Afghanistan from inside Pakistan (Rubin, 2018). With this history of tensions and hostility, relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan cast a long shadow over peace dialogues focusing on Afghanistan, making a study of their troubled relationship an essential prerequisite for progress towards building peace in the region.

Afghan Refugees in Pakistan

Continued violence, political and economic turmoil and poverty have discouraged refugees from returning home. Consequently, it has resulted in a continuous influx of refugees into Pakistan. The number of unregistered refugees is believed to be far greater since movement across the Pak-Afghan border has traditionally taken place under an unregulated and unmonitored system, thus making it close to impossible to give an accurate number of unregistered refugees. As a result, Pakistan has been the most vulnerable country to mass movement, militants, trafficking of drugs and arms from Afghanistan.

For majority of the Afghan refugees who fled from Afghanistan in 1979, Pakistan became their

permanent home. While many have attained Pakistani citizenship through illegal means, others continued to live in Pakistan without facing any form of discrimination. Pakistan has second and third generation locally born Afghans who while on paper may be Afghans are Pakistani in spirit and conduct. According to 2014 statistics, more than 51 per cent of the total Afghan refugee population in Pakistan is under years of age (with the majority born in Pakistan). Unlike in Iran, which restricted the movement of refugees to camps and prevented them from indulging in politics, registered and unregistered refugees in Pakistan have like all Pakistani nationals, been given access to education, health and the right to work

While many work as laborer, others have found odd jobs and set up small businesses. Yet others have established themselves within the country's business community and working class, particularly in the transport, carpet and gem stone industry. For instance, the business of gemstones, which is primarily run by Afghan traders based in Peshawar, constitute a considerable part of Pakistan's export to other countries and has earned US\$27.562 million in terms of foreign exchange in the last five years. Similarly, Afghan refugees make up more than 70 per cent of the work force in the carpet weaving industry in Khyber Pukhtunkhwa which is renowned all over the world for its skillful art and has contributed significantly to Pakistan's economy. 30 As refugees and locals coexist, many of them have married locals and integrated into the larger society. Majority of the refugees that came to Pakistan were illiterate and had no finances at all. However, once settled they were able to find work and earn, even though at a subsistence level. Pakistan provided them with a higher quality of life than in Afghanistan. Even after more than three decades, the same holds true. On the contrary, the Afghan refugees in Iran have had limited access to public facilities and have not been able to merge into the Iranian society so easily. While Afghan refugees were welcomed in Iran after the Soviet invasion, by 1990 Iran's attitude underwent a significant change from "integration to repatriation and prevention of future flows due to continuing uncertainty in Afghanistan." Over the years, Iran imposed several restrictions on the Afghan refugees

in an attempt to compel repatriation. These include increasing the cost of living, decreasing financial assistance for healthcare, unemployment, limited access to free education, laws prohibiting undocumented Afghans, denial of citizenship and marriage rights, and impunity for attacks and violence perpetrated against them by private actors. Since 2002, Iran has begun to implement stringent measures restricting the movement of refugees and has declared "no go areas" for refugees. They were limited to border provinces, but they now exist in majority of Iran's 31 provinces, the most recent being the Mazandaran province. 16 provinces have a complete ban on Afghans living there and 12 provinces have bans on particular areas and cities. Tehran, Alborz, and Qom are the only provinces that do not have residential restrictions on Afghans. Simultaneously, the number of works permits issued to Afghan refugees has drastically decreased and the cost for renewing permits has been substantially increased. This has made them more vulnerable to deportation. Time and again, the Iranian authorities have repeatedly associated unemployment, crime and drug problems in Iran to the presence of these refugees

Over the years, Afghan refugees have become an issue of concern for Pakistan, too, due to domestic constraints, weak economy, refugee fatigue, declining donor assistance, increase in crime and the threat of terrorism. Hence Islamabad has begun to raise the issue of their honorable repatriation. During the 1990's, international funding for Afghan humanitarian relief began to decrease and as a result Pakistan's stance towards Afghan refugees also began to alter. An 'encashment' program was launched in Pakistan by the UNCHR in 1990 to encourage voluntary repatriation. After the victory of the mujahideen in 1992, Pakistan advocated for repatriation. As a result, Afghanistan saw the return of 1.4 to 1.5 million refugees. However, after the Taliban came into power, foreign aid once again began to decline which led to many leaving Afghanistan and crossing into Pakistan. 37 Hence, Pakistan was once again feeling the strain of incoming refugees in addition to the already existing ones.

Subsequently, in 1995, all food rations to refugee camps had ceased as the World Food Program

(WFP) determined that the Afghans were capable of providing for their own food needs. As the flow of international aid began to diminish, the number of Afghans moving to cities to look for work increased. As a result, by 1995, Pakistan began to refuse refugee status to new arrivals, terming them as economic migrants.³⁹ By the end of 1995, the UNCHR stopped registering new arrivals. Hence the repatriation that had started was short lived, as fewer Afghans were going back, for example in 1996, only 120,000 repatriated.

In the year 2000, the international community, too, began to lose interest in Afghanistan which resulted in a further decline in donor assistance. Islamabad began to show signs of 'refugee fatigue' as they adversely affected Pakistan's economy and meagre national resources. Although the UNHCR provides assistance for 1.5 million registered refugees of the total three million, it is estimated that during the past three decades, Pakistan has spent hundreds of billions of dollars on hosting Afghan refugees. Over the years, the budget for Afghan refugees in Pakistan has also decreased significantly from US\$201 million in 1981 to US\$12 million in 2000. a mere US\$10 for each of the 1.2 million refugees living in camps.

The overall presence of around five million refugees has put an added strain on Pakistan's environment, infrastructure, local economy as well as resources such as schools, hospitals etc. The presence of refugees has driven wages downward since refugees are willing to work for less and for exacerbating pressure upon fragile social sectors. Many refugees have established "refugee villages" on the private land of locals and despite having lived in peace, due to the increase in crime and growing wave of terrorism, they have been asked by the land owners to leave. Many refugees had established "refugee villages" on the private land of locals.¹ Although they had been living in peace, the increase in crime and growing wave of terrorism in Pakistan has compelled the land owners to ask the refugees to vacate. This has resulted in clashes over the possession of land between locals and the refugees as well as mounting pressure on the government to repatriate them. The security Impact of the presence of refugees has also played an important role in altering Islamabad's stance regarding refugees and

hence the call for their repatriation. Afghanistan continues to be the largest producer of opium, producing about 92 per cent of the world's opium crop. It is believed that militants groups fund their insurgencies through an 'informal tax' they collect when it is smuggled through Pakistan. There is no doubt that, among other reasons, the use of drugs in Pakistan is also an unfortunate consequence of the prolonged conflict in Afghanistan as well as the presence of the Afghan refugees. This is reflected in the fact that during the 1980s there were an estimated 50,000 drug users in Pakistan; this number rose to 8.1 million in 2011.

Literature Gap

There are many studies regarding Pakistan-Afghanistan relations: A case study of Afghan refugees in Pakistan however there is rarely any study about current nature of Pak-Afghan relations departing Afghan refugees and its economic impact on Pakistan's economy.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The researcher has used qualitative method of documentary analysis. In documentary Analysis we study the available materials including books, articles,⁴⁰ newspapers, audio, video recording, interviews, policy documents, TV channels, and social media forums to get more information about out topic to analyse our problem (Gorsky & Mold, 2019). Documentary analysis in qualitative research, there has been a noticeable rise in the number of qualitative studies referencing document analysis, but many of these lack detailed accounts of the procedures followed or the results obtained from the analysis. Even experienced researchers sometimes fail to use document analysis effectively, indicating a gap in understanding or application. This method clarifies the role and function of documents in qualitative research, define the nature and types of documents used. Discuss strengths and limitations of document analysis. Provide examples and practical guidance to help researchers apply document analysis properly and to promote a better understanding and more effective use of document analysis as a research method (Bowen, 2009). In document analysis which is a qualitative research

method. In this method we, learn how to analyze documents qualitatively (Schuttler, 2023).

Theoretical Framework

Realism is a rich and complex tradition of thoughts existing since centuries. It means since the inception of human being on earth some people are having realist orientation and others are liberalist orientation. Realism started to dominate International Relations after World War-II. In the field of International Relations (IR), realism is a theoretical framework that proposes at international level there is anarchy. In order to survive a state must struggle for survival through self-help. Its history can be traced from 5th century BC. From the Peloponnesian war by Thucydides, who was a Greek realist historian and general between 431 and 404 BCE. Besides, In the ancient world we can find out a Chinese realist philosophy in the shape of Confucious and Sun-Zue, who wrote a book named Art of War. In the same time, we can find the realist philosophy of Chanakya a book named Kautilya Arthashastra a minister of Mauryan Empire, which was a vast and influential kingdom in ancient India, existing from roughly 321 to 185 BCE. Founded by Chandragupta Maurya (Antunes & Camisão, 2018).

Roots of realism can be found in the start of Renaissance by the Italian philosopher Niccolo Machiavelli. In the modern age we find Thomas Hobbes a classical realist famous for social contract theory and argues life of a man is solitary, poor, nasty brutish and short.” There is war of all against all”. Then E.H. Carr and Hans J. Morgenthau (Behr & Xander , 2014).

realist point of view is especially focusing on how the balance of power (polarity) and the role of strong countries (hegemonic stability) shape today’s world order. It also discusses current debates among realists and responds to common criticisms of realism, particularly its doubts about the future of global cooperation. Furthermore, focus on power and conflict is a helpful reminder not to be too optimistic about global progress, which can sometimes hide deep problems like inequality and exploitation. Overall, realism helps explain how international systems work and challenges the values and assumptions of other viewpoints (Charrette & Folker, 2018).

Basic Assumption of Realism

States are made by men and men are selfish, self-interested and power hungry by nature. Human wants and desires are unlimited and resources are limited. In this material world. The scarcity of resources will create conflict. Conflict is inevitable. There is anarchy at international level. State is rational actor. In this anarchical world only, powerful states survive. This is classical realism.

Variants/ Types of realism

Classical realism Neo-realism Balance of power
Hegemonic stability Theory Offensive realism
Defensive realism

Although Thucydides, writing more than two millennia ago, cannot be classified as a ‘realist’ in the contemporary sense, given that a formalized IR theory did not emerge until the twentieth century, modern scholars retrospectively identify numerous parallels between the cognitive frameworks and behaviors prevalent in ancient civilizations and those observed in the present era. Consequently, they have utilized his oeuvre, alongside that of other historical figures, to substantiate the proposition that a perennial theoretical paradigm exists that transcends all documented human experience. This paradigm has been designated as ‘realism’.

Data Analysis/ Results Current nature of Afghanistan–Pakistan relations

The current nature of Afghanistan–Pakistan relations is marked by deep mistrust, increased hostility, and strategic uncertainty, despite shared historical, cultural, and religious ties. Since the Taliban’s return to power in August 2021, Pakistan initially hoped the regime would stabilize Afghanistan and eliminate anti-Pakistan militant threats, particularly from the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). However, these expectations have not been met. Instead, Pakistan has witnessed a sharp increase in TTP-led attacks, many of which are believed to be planned and coordinated from Afghan territory. The Taliban government’s refusal to take decisive action against the TTP has become a major source of friction.

One of the most contentious issues between the two countries remains the Durand Line, the 2,600-kilometer-long border that Afghanistan does not officially recognize. Clashes frequently occur over

Pakistan's attempts to fence the border to curb illegal crossings and militant infiltration. The Taliban has rejected the legitimacy of the border fence, leading to frequent skirmishes between the border forces of both sides, especially in areas like Torkham and Chaman. The relations have further deteriorated due to Pakistan's crackdown on Afghan refugees, particularly undocumented individuals. In October 2023, Pakistan announced a policy to deport over a million undocumented Afghans, citing security concerns. This move was met with strong criticism from the Taliban, which condemned the policy as inhumane and politically motivated. The refugee issue has added a humanitarian and diplomatic dimension to the strained ties, further complicating bilateral cooperation.

The economic relationship has also suffered. Cross-border trade, once seen as a means to foster peace, has been disrupted due to political tensions and security concerns. While trade continues through official routes, restrictions, closures, and uncertainty have hampered economic engagement. Pakistan remains one of Afghanistan's major trading partners, but both sides have used trade as a pressure tool, with the Taliban occasionally blocking exports or imposing conditions on Pakistani goods. In the realm of diplomacy, both countries maintain embassies and continue formal contacts, but high-level engagements have become rare and largely unproductive. Islamabad has repeatedly urged Kabul to "do more" against terrorist groups, while the Taliban accuses Pakistan of undermining Afghan sovereignty and interfering in its domestic affairs. Moreover, regional and international dynamics have impacted their relations. Afghanistan's warming ties with India and other regional powers are viewed with suspicion in Islamabad, while the Taliban resents what it perceives as Pakistan's overbearing attitude. The lack of international recognition for the Taliban regime also complicates formal diplomatic processes and limits third-party mediation.

Afghanistan-Pakistan relations in 2024-2025 are strained, unstable, and primarily driven by mutual security concerns rather than cooperation. The border issue, rise in terrorism, refugee crisis, and political mistrust have created a toxic environment where bilateral engagement is reactive rather than constructive. Unless key security and political concerns are addressed, especially the TTP issue and

refugee management, the relationship is likely to remain fragile, confrontational, and unpredictable. The prolonged conflict, poverty, and instability in Afghanistan have led to a continuous influx of Afghan refugees into Pakistan, many of whom remain unregistered due to the porous and unregulated Pak-Afghan border. Since 1979, millions have settled permanently in Pakistan, with many integrating into society and contributing to the economy, especially in sectors like transport, carpet weaving, and gemstone trade. Unlike Iran, which imposed strict restrictions on Afghan refugees, Pakistan allowed greater freedoms, including access to work, education, and healthcare. However, over time, Pakistan has faced increasing challenges, including economic burden, declining international aid, rising crime, pressure on infrastructure, and security threats. Refugees have also been linked to falling wages, land disputes, and drug trafficking, as Afghanistan remains the world's largest opium producer. These issues have contributed to Pakistan's shifting policy toward promoting repatriation, especially as donor interest has declined and the local population expresses growing frustration over the prolonged refugee presence.

Reasons of Deporting Afghan Refugees

Pakistan's decision to deport Afghan refugees is driven by a combination of security, economic, political, and administrative concerns. One of the primary reasons is the rising number of terrorist attacks in the country, many of which are blamed on groups like the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) that, according to Pakistani officials, operate from Afghan soil. The porous nature of the Pak-Afghan border has allowed militants to exploit refugee status and unregulated movement, posing a serious security threat. Additionally, over 1.7 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan are undocumented, making it difficult for authorities to monitor their activities or provide them with legal protection. Economically, the long-term presence of refugees has placed a heavy burden on Pakistan's already stretched resources, including healthcare, education, housing, and employment. With declining international aid, Pakistan argues it can no longer sustain the cost of hosting such a large refugee population. Politically, tensions with the Taliban regime in Kabul have worsened, particularly due to the Taliban's unwillingness to act against anti-Pakistan

militant groups. Deporting refugees is also seen as a way for Pakistan to pressure the Taliban into greater cooperation on security matters. Furthermore, there is growing public and political pressure within Pakistan to control illegal migration, especially in light of social tensions, rising crime rates, and competition for jobs. The deportation policy is part of a broader national security strategy aimed at safeguarding Pakistan's sovereignty, maintaining internal stability, and reinforcing border control.

Economic Impact:

Soon after arrival of Afghan refugees in Pakistan, a competition was started between refugees and local citizens over resources, water, land, food and property. This created a gap between refugees and citizens of two provinces of Pakistan i.e., Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan where refugees in large numbers were being hosted. With the passage of time and decades, refugees demand on resources, education, energy, transportation and employment were also increased which further created anger among locals of the two provinces (Aslam, 2001).

Both the provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan are poor and claimed deprivation on their rights, and Afghan refugees really affected economic interests of locals of these two provinces. Economic activities of refugees might be beneficial for a particular class or government but for poor class and those depending on monthly incomes it is violation of their rights. Refugees work as a cheap labor which affect local labors as market follows profit and prefer cheap labor for their economic interests. Refugees are also one of the reasons of inflation, as presence of refugees in large numbers also accelerate demands of a product, if demand of resources increases than surely price of commodities also rise. These activities are profitable for market but locals suffer from inflation which accumulate fury among them. (Aslam, 2001).

There are also economic concerns that most Afghan traders have their business in different cities of Pakistan but do not pay taxes. For instance, In Peshawar alone, these traders became billionaire but still acquitted themselves from paying taxes. Such things created burden for local tax payers and businessman, and growth of revenue collection is also badly affected (Roehrs, 2015).

Economic impact of refugees on host countries may also be positive, economic growth of country may generate and lead to the development. For instance, Much of Afghanistan's livestock too shifted to Pakistan with the refugees which is estimated almost 2.5 million, according to the United Nations high commissioner for refugees, Afghan brought with them 45,000 camels, 35,000 cows, and 25,000 donkeys etc. due to which local market of meat and milk was boosted up and local purchase of food increased. Because of refugee's assistance programs supplying of relief items by international agencies are also positive signs for local economies. Foreign funded projects and Aid organizations disburse their resources for building infrastructure and development of host state. Therefore, there are also positive aspects but large-scale presence of refugees is really a burden on host country, especially for less developed countries.

Conclusion

The relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan remains deeply strained, influenced by historical disputes, ongoing security challenges, and the complex issue of Afghan refugees. The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in 2021, initially perceived by Pakistan as an opportunity for regional stability, has instead led to a surge in cross-border terrorism, primarily attributed to the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Pakistan's frustration over the Taliban's failure to curb TTP activities has been a major source of diplomatic tension, further exacerbated by disagreements over the Durand Line and frequent border skirmishes. The humanitarian and political complications surrounding Afghan refugees have also worsened relations. With over four decades of hosting millions of Afghan refugees—many undocumented—Pakistan now finds itself burdened by growing security risks, economic pressure, and declining international support. These factors have driven Islamabad to implement strict deportation policies in a bid to manage its internal stability and send a political message to Kabul.

Economically, the presence of Afghan refugees has had both positive and negative impacts. While some have contributed to the economy through labor, trade, and entrepreneurship, particularly in industries like carpets, gemstones, and transport, their large-scale presence has also intensified competition for

resources, jobs, and public services, especially in the underdeveloped provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. Local resentment has grown due to rising inflation, strain on infrastructure, loss of employment opportunities for citizens, and tax evasion by Afghan traders. Yet, international humanitarian aid and the influx of livestock and other goods have provided some economic benefits to the host economy. Nevertheless, for a developing country like Pakistan with its own socio-economic challenges, the long-term hosting of such a large refugee population is unsustainable without adequate international burden-sharing.

In conclusion, the Afghanistan–Pakistan relationship remains fragile, shaped by insecurity, political mistrust, and socio-economic tensions. The Afghan refugee issue lies at the heart of this complex dynamic, symbolizing both humanitarian responsibility and national vulnerability. If left unaddressed, the refugee situation will continue to fuel bilateral tensions, internal instability, and economic strain. For lasting peace and cooperation, both countries— along with international stakeholders, must work toward comprehensive solutions, including safe and voluntary repatriation, stronger border management, deradicalization efforts, and regional development strategies that address the root causes of displacement and mistrust.

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