

The Impacts of Afghanistan's Imbroglia on the Interests and Connectivity of Pakistan with Central Asia

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Abstract

The decades-long imbroglia in Afghanistan has negative impacts on both the domestic and foreign affairs of Pakistan. Along with other economic, political and strategic impacts, it also negatively impacts the interests and connectivity with energy-rich Central Asian Republics. The primary objective of this study is to explore the impacts of Afghanistan's issue on Pakistan's engagement in Central Asia. The imbroglia is impacting Pakistan's engagement with Central Asia in two ways. First, Afghanistan is located on the crossroad; all the shortest routes connecting Pakistan with Central Asia cross through its territory. Therefore, the insecurity in the country made it uncondusive for any connectivity project. Trans-Afghan railway project, TAPI, TAP-500, CASA-1000, and many other projects between the two regions are still a dream. Second, the Afghan policy of Pakistan to support the Taliban was not liked by the CARs. It has also negatively impacted Pakistan's engagement with them. This study is based on the Complex Interdependence Theory, which helps to understand why, despite these problems and differences, Pakistan and CARs are cooperating and working together.

Keywords: Pakistan, Central Asia, Afghanistan, Inter-Regional Connectivity, Energy Security.

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1.Introduction

Geographical distance is one of the main factors affecting ties between countries. This has brought attention to neighbours' role in national foreign policy. Therefore, states always developed different approaches to them (Nejad,2023). Afghanistan's geography offers several challenges and opportunities to Pakistan and other neighbouring countries. Afghanistan separates Pakistan from Central Asia; it is a gateway for Pakistan to the region. The strategic location of the country at the crossroads of Central Asia and South Asia has made it the hub of connectivity for energy-rich Central Asia and energy-deficient South Asia. There are geo-cultural links between Central Asia, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. They consist of historical, ethnic, religious, civilizational, racial, and cultural linkages (Mahrough, 2023). It is pertinent to mention that Under the Soviet economy, there was an unrestricted movement of goods and services within the state borders, but the republics were restricted from external trade and other types of engagement (Yadav,2018). However, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, Central Asian Republics (CARs) are enthusiastic about establishing connections with the international community. Afghanistan's internal schism and instability had badly affected Pakistan's aspirations to build a network of economic and trade relations. Pakistan's main foreign policy objectives in Central Asia can be achieved if there is peace and stability in Afghanistan. Pakistan has to manage its relations with Afghanistan and CARs, but the unstable Afghanistan is affecting Pakistan's relations with CARs in two ways. Firstly, the security issues hamper Pakistan's connectivity with the CARs as all the shortest routes pass through Afghanistan. Secondly, Pakistan's support of the Taliban regime also created policy divergence between Pakistan and CARs. They have been facing inter-regional connectivity issues since their independence. The Soviet transport infrastructure primarily focused on Russia and other Soviet republics, with almost non-existent connectivity with other regions (Batsaikhan and Dabrowski,2017). Central Asia was largely disconnected from the other parts of the world during the Soviet era (Akbari,2023), but after the disintegration of the USSR and the emergence of CARs in 1991, levels of cooperation and connectivity between Central Asia and South Asia are continuously increasing.

Pakistan's strategy in Central Asia prioritizes the utmost significance of interregional connectivity. Developing the necessary infrastructure for the movement of goods via roads between Pakistan and Kyrgyzstan highlights the concrete measures taken to overcome geographical barriers. In addition, the strong and effective partnerships in security, increasing exchanges of high officials, and signing of many important agreements related to connectivity projects highlight the diverse and complex character of connectivity between the two regions. The relationship between Pakistan and Central Asia is characterized by a complex network of political interactions and rapidly growing economic linkages. The Trans-Afghan railway project, the Central Asia South Asia (CASA)-1000 project, the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline, and the Quadrilateral Traffic in Transit Agreement (QTTA) agreement and many others are notable examples of the dedication to regional connectivity. However, the biggest obstacle preventing these projects from operating and connecting the two regions is Afghanistan's complex and difficult situation. The connectivity projects and trade via Afghanistan between the two regions also benefit landlocked Afghanistan. The country will receive 400 million dollars yearly from the transit fee alone from the pipeline, which is equal to 8% of the total revenue of the project (Javaid and Rashid, 2015). Moreover, The TAPI is also known as the peace pipeline, with the 1,814 km trans-country natural gas pipeline running through four countries. TAPI project will be able to provide gas to Afghanistan, and the country may benefit from transit fees as well. A functional gas pipeline will also be a hallmark project, demonstrating the country's investment stability. Another potential project, CASA-1000, will bring 1300 megawatts (MW) of seasonal power from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to Afghanistan and Pakistan. In addition, the country will also get 50 million dollars annually as a transit fee from the CASA-1000 project (Mustafa, 2016). It will create interdependence among participating countries of this project, so their policy differences will not overshadow collective economic gains.

2 .Dilemma of the Ambitions of Pakistan to Access Central Asia via Afghanistan

New Delhi has always used the Afghan's soil to counter Islamabad and its interests and limit its access to Central Asia through Afghanistan. India always supported the Tajik-dominated Northern Alliance in Afghanistan

(Sudarshan,2019). During the Taliban's rule, regional and global players supported the proxy war in Afghanistan to gain influence. As a result of the U.S. grand strategy in Afghanistan to counter the Soviet Union, Mujahideen were created, armed, and supported. Taliban ultimately established their control in 1996, and Pakistan, United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia were the supporters of the Taliban (led by Mullah Omar), while India, Russia and some others were supporters of the Northern Alliance group. Ahmad Shah Massoud, Karim Khalili, Abdul Rashid Dostum, Ismail Khan, and Mohammed Fahim were among the militant leaders who formed the Northern Alliance (Sullivan,2007).

It is worth noting that Pakistan was one of three countries, along with UAE and Saudi Arabia, to recognise the Taliban regime. As a result, they significantly restricted the influence and access of New Delhi to Afghanistan and also curtailed India's foreign policy objectives. India wanted an anti-Pakistan government in Afghanistan. It may have been one of the few services that the Taliban extended to Pakistan. However, after the tragic incident of 9/11, the U.S. launched a global war against terrorism to root out the Al-Qaeda network from Afghanistan. Taliban sided with Al-Qaeda's chief Osama Bin Laden and faced U.S. wrath.

Following the U.S. attack and eventually the defeat of the Taliban, Hamid Karzai was appointed as the interim President of Afghanistan by Loya Jirga in 2002. Due to the massive presence of U.S. and allied troops in Afghanistan, the influence of India increased drastically. India countered Islamabad's influence in Afghanistan on the one hand and also supported militant groups against Pakistan. India also extended significant support to Baloch separatist elements.

Thus, India was not only successful in countering Islamabad's interests in Afghanistan and its access to Central Asia but also provided material help to terrorist and militant groups active in Pakistan and remained successful in sponsoring the Baloch separatist movement. During the period of US occupation of Afghanistan, India opened 12 consulates in those Afghan cities which are near the Pakistani border. The existence of Indian consulates in Afghanistan irritates Pakistan. It believes that India uses them to carry out secret activities to destabilise Pakistan. These consulates were charged with printing counterfeit cash, financing terrorism, and interference in Pakistan's domestic affairs, as well as the installation of training camps

for terrorists in Halmand, Qeshila Jaded, Kahak, Panjshir Valley, Gereshk, and Hasan Kilies in Nimruz province (Fair,2008). Later, Kalbhushan Yadive was the proof of the fears and delegations from Pakistan.

Pakistan's backing for the Pakhtun-dominated Taliban group, which opposed ethnic fictions based on Uzbek and Tajik ethnicity, also affected the bilateral relations of Pakistan with CARs, notably Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, which share borders with Afghanistan (Rahman,2007). They did not appreciate this policy of Pakistan. The reason was that the situation of Afghanistan had caused serious security challenges and also threatened the stability of CARs, as well as they fought Tajik and Uzbek groups. Pakistan was unable to disengage from Afghanistan affairs owing to its security interests. As a consequence, the gap between Pakistan and CARs widened dramatically. Islamabad's position in Afghanistan is directly related to its Central Asian vision as it has a huge impact on whether Pakistan and the CARs interests are converging or diverging. The Afghan imbroglio badly hampered Islamabad's ties with Central Asia. In this respect, Pakistan's previous strategy of backing the Taliban has caused a bad image of the country, as well as a feeling of skepticism among the CARs, who remained hesitant to strengthen ties with Pakistan. At a press conference held after the Ashgabat ECO summit in 1997, President Karimov severely criticized the outside players in settling the Afghan question. He stated that "the conflict in this country will end only after certain foreign countries stop interfering in it" (Kazakova and Komissina,2001). The country in question was not named, but his indication was towards Pakistan. By this time, Islamabad was extremely interested in building a gas pipeline through Afghanistan and began actively looking for ways to reconcile the opposing sides. For example, in 1997, a meeting was held in Tashkent of the heads of the Pakistani, Turkish, Iranian, Tajik and Uzbek foreign policy departments, which was organized with the approval of the leaders of these countries to develop a single Afghanistan strategy. During this meeting, Pakistan proposed holding an international conference in Islamabad with the participation of Iran, China, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, along with Russia and the U.S., as observers on the settlement of the Afghanistan crisis. This initiative was further discussed during Pakistani Foreign Minister Gohar Ayub Khan's visits to Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in 1997, but the final outcome of these negotiations remained

inconclusive. They were also against holding a meeting among the leaders of the hostile Afghan groups, believing this to be of benefit only to the Taliban movement (Kazakova and Komissina,2001).

There is also a question that why Pakistan supported the Taliban. In the beginning, Pakistan had supported Hizb-e-Islami, a Pashtoon-dominated militant group headed by Gulbaddin Hakmatyar, in order to create a somewhat stable Afghanistan with a government that was friendly to Islamabad. Pakistan thought that a stable administration having good ties with Islamabad might produce a transit corridor to Central Asia vis-à-vis it does not want to insecure its western border. When it became obvious that Hakmatyar could not govern then, Islamabad started backing the then-newly emerged Taliban. Pakistan's Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto had appointed the interior minister Naseerullah Babar as the person in charge of Afghan affairs.

Pakistan realized that the Taliban was the only group capable of re-establishing peace and forming a friendly Pashtoon-dominated regime in Afghanistan that would work according to the interests of Pakistan and help to expand its access to CARs. Another reason for the backing of the Taliban was the belief that after the consolidation of its position in Afghanistan, Russia would attempt to get access to the Arabian Sea via Pakistan. Following Russia's departure from Afghanistan, the situation worsened as foreign players and neighbouring states began to assist opposing groups (Rashid,2002), and Islamabad supported them as it believed them a comparatively suitable option. In the meanwhile, Al-Qaeda started establishing a network in Afghanistan under the auspices of the Taliban. From 1998 onwards, when Al-Qaeda established its network in Afghanistan, the Taliban appeared to be a liability rather than an asset for Pakistan. As mentioned earlier, Pakistan supported a Taliban regime in Kabul to have a stable Afghanistan and a friendly government in Kabul positively inclined towards Islamabad. However, the Taliban's nexus with Al-Qaeda posed a serious challenge to regional and global peace. Many of the security establishments in Islamabad called for a change of strategy after the demolition of the Bamiyan Buddha and their continuation of Osama bin Laden's and other Al-Qaeda leadership's asylum in Afghanistan. Due to Al-Qaeda's objectives of attacking America, 9/11 was bound to happen. A security loophole caused that on September 11, 2001. The incident of 9/11

provided Pakistan with a plausible excuse to side with the U.S. and be part of the global war against terrorism.

A stable Afghanistan is undoubtedly in Islamabad's best interests. A prosperous and stable neighbour will undoubtedly open many doors for Pakistani goods and services and economic development, which is in the interest of both sides. It will also enable Pakistan to access the markets of CARs, which it has been seeking for a long time. Likewise, a stabilized Afghanistan would facilitate the construction of crucial gas pipelines and electrical transmission networks.

Following the collapse of the Taliban regime in 2001 and the restoration of Islamabad's international image, the country restarted its efforts to establish cordial ties with Central Asian Republics by sending high-level delegations to these countries regularly. Along with stability in the country, trust in Pak-Afghan relations is also necessary. It will assist Pakistan in re-establishing ties with CARs and allow the establishment of mutual projects to fulfil expanding energy demands.

According to the Complex Interdependence Theory (CIT) of International Relations, good economic relations mitigate the security challenges that affect the relations of the countries, and there are fewer chances of any serious armed conflict but a diplomatic row, which could convert into an armed conflict. It is evident that the recent increased economic interdependence between Pakistan and CARs led to the end of the differences over their Afghan policies. This thing was witnessed during their cooperation in the Afghan peace process after the US withdrawal, remain being the party of several initiatives like "Six plus 1" and "Six plus 2" initiatives, the joint forms of six neighbours of Afghanistan plus the U.S. and Russia, and above all arranged many conferences on Afghan issue after the takeover of Taliban in mid-August, 2021 as well as the visit of Imran Khan the Premier of Pakistan to different CARs in the wake of the takeover of Taliban and the visits of the presidents of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to Pakistan and many other high official of CARs visits to Pakistan.

3.Impacts of Insecurity in Afghanistan on Pakistan's Engagement with Central Asia

Two types of security challenges are affecting Pakistan's interests in Central Asia: first, the Afghan problem, and second, insecurity and terrorism in the region. Due to these two problems, Pakistan is facing an economic crisis.

Insecurity in the region, especially in Afghanistan, has diverse impacts on Pakistan's interests in Central Asia and on different ongoing projects of Pakistan with CARs like TAPI and CASA-1000 in the region. "The \$1.2 billion CASA-1000 project will bring 1300 megawatts (MW) of seasonal power from Tajikistan and the Kyrgyz Republic to Afghanistan and Pakistan. It will be a major new source of revenue in the regional electricity market, transmitting 4.6 billion kilowatt hours (kWh)/year" (<https://www.casa-1000.org>).

Pakistan has a variety of challenges in its ties with Central Asia because of the emergence of new security alignments and the shift in the geostrategic equilibrium in the whole region after the 9/11 attacks. In the current context, progress on connectivity projects and trade and energy supply schemes largely depend on peace in the whole region. The infrastructure related issues have also affected Central Asia's exports (Pomfret and Anderson, 2001). A major challenge for the regional actors is to counter emerging threats of terrorism in the region. The ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, also known as Daesh) threat has also increased in the Central Asian region. However, the good thing is that the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) is struggling hard to stop the expansion of its influence and ideology in the region. In 2015, it was reported by the International Crisis Group that in the last three years, 4,000 people from Central Asia, including females, went to Syria to join ISIS (International Crisis Group, 2015). The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan has also proclaimed allegiance to the Islamic State (IS) (Dawn, 2014). According to another report, IS had 750 active members in Central Asia in 2018 (Tuna, 2021). The possibility of spreading IS threat in Central Asia is high because people are facing socio-economic problems, i.e., rising unemployment, increased poverty, authoritarian regimes, poor governance, massive corruption, and discriminatory laws. In any society, such an environment seems to be conducive to radicalization and the spread of extremist ideologies. The threat posed by IS and other extremist groups is a dilemma for CARs, Afghanistan, and Pakistan's regional interests, particularly its economic interests. Such an environment thwarts foreign direct investment as investors are scared of losing their capital.

In recent decades, geo-economic affairs, especially energy security, have assumed an important role in international relations (Zarei and Sadat, 2023). The instability and insecurity in Afghanistan are certain to have implications

for several planned and ongoing projects related to energy supply, trade and communication channels in the region, as it may have a domino effect. The TAPI gas pipeline is such an initiative whose fate has been influenced by the changing power dynamics in Afghanistan. The prolonged insecurity in Afghanistan, which works as the land bridge linking Central Asia and South Asia (Bharti,2023), is the main cause of the failure of regional connectivity projects between Pakistan and CARs. Now the work progress on this pipeline mostly depends on the policy of the Taliban after their takeover of Kabul in August 2021 and the capability of various groups within the country to uphold and protect their sides of the contract (Kulkarni,2019). Conversely, the construction of the TAPI project may be possible only if the Taliban, with whom Pakistan has a relatively good relationship, shows political maturity and conveys practical support for the scheme. Given Pakistan's severe energy crisis because of insufficient gas supplies, it is not unexpected to see Islamabad advocating and even pressurizing the Afghan Taliban to assist work on the project.

It is an undeniable fact that peace in Afghanistan is a prerequisite for achieving the objectives and interests of Islamabad in Central Asia, as Afghanistan cannot be bypassed in regional trade routes and energy supply projects. The benefits of interregional connectivity for both sides can be achieved when the security condition in the country is adequately stable and land-based access to CARs is ensured. Owing to the insecurity, bilateral trade and other connectivity projects between the two regions are still waiting to be implemented. A desk for providing concrete recommendations can be constituted in the respective foreign ministries of these countries; who can come up with an idea of how to overcome these challenges? Security challenges and lawlessness across the country are making trade between Pakistan and Central Asia very difficult. Rival terrorist groups extort money at their checkpoints in their area of control and rob trade convoys in which a lot of drivers and businessmen are even injured and killed. Therefore, the Afghan conflict is a very fundamental obstacle to regional economic integration. The security challenges in Afghanistan have also affected socio-economic development, which caused instability in the country (Bharti,2023), one of the prerequisites for interregional connectivity. Following the withdrawal of foreign forces, the Taliban forcibly took control of the country, raised fears of a worsening civil war. If

the insecurity increases and violence intensifies due to the U.S. military departure, it might become the most serious impediment to economic connectivity in the region. However, so far, it is being debated in policy-making circles whether the Taliban should be isolated, opposed, or engaged (Dobbins and et al,2022).

The recent political changes in Afghanistan clearly demonstrate the country's inherent interconnectedness with the unpredictable global geopolitical landscape. Given the current geopolitical circumstances, it is clear that India developed strong and targeted policies towards Afghanistan in order to protect its geopolitical pursuits despite existing scepticism and concerns (Yousuf,2023). Indian geopolitics in Afghanistan against Pakistan also hindered connectivity between Pakistan and Central Asia. Despite the fact that India is one of the largest consumers of energy and the demand for gas has also been increasing, India became part of the TAPI gas pipeline (Sarkar,2023), but India is not willing to go for TAPI on the grounds of geopolitics. The triangle complex relations of Afghanistan–India–Pakistan have passed through many political and strategic shifts (Wani,2022). Even the US wants India to be part of the pipeline project emanating from Turkmenistan (Paswan,2013). Without peace and stability in Afghanistan, energy pipelines and other connectivity projects cannot be materialised between the two regions via Afghanistan.

4 .Impacts of the Regional Terrorist Organizations on Pakistan-Central Asia Engagement

Terrorism, the war on terror, and regional instability all have repercussions for several planned and existing connectivity and economic initiatives in the region. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and the Islamic Jihad Union are two major jihadist organisations that emerged in Central Asia after the disintegration of the USSR and 9/11, respectively. Radical groups working in the region also posed a danger to Pakistan's interests in the region. These terrorist groups have safe havens in Afghanistan. Therefore, the governments of Central Asian countries view the U.S. and its allies' withdrawal from the country with panic and pessimism (Balci and Chaudet, 2014). Afghanistan is a bridge of regional connectivity, and both regions are accessing each other through their territory. The so-called war on terror in Afghanistan was formally ended in mid-2021 with the withdrawal of the U.S. and NATO from the country, but terrorists and their networks are still

present in the whole region, which are targeting Pakistan's interests. The chaos in Afghanistan is one of the most essential and pressing concerns. When the Afghanistan problem is fully addressed, Pakistan will have a better chance of gaining easier access to Central Asia. Therefore, Islamabad is making every effort feasible to reconcile the conflicting parties in the country and restore political stability and order, as this is in the best interests of Pakistan. The Afghan issue is the most critical impediment to Pakistan's political and economic engagement with CARs. Afghanistan's recognition by the international community will solve half of the problems. At least Afghanistan will be allowed to be engaged economically. That economic engagement will avert the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan on the one hand and increase interdependence on the other hand.

It is not new that terrorism and militancy are hitting Pakistan's relations with Central Asian countries. In the late 1990s, many countries in the region, including Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, faced bloody violence committed by religious activists. Taliban, Chechens, Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Arabs were important figures among other foreign warriors who were fighting against Soviet occupation in Afghanistan. After the withdrawal of the USSR from Afghanistan, they started fighting against the governments of Central Asian Republics. After the US attack on Afghanistan, many among them moved to Pakistan's tribal regions. These countries, at varying levels, considered Islamabad responsible directly because of their safe havens in Pakistan. Islam Karimov, the Uzbek President, has accused Pakistan of training Islamist extremists in Uzbekistan (Hunter,2001). Rather than pursue security collaboration with Pakistan, several Central Asian countries have chosen to re-establish defence ties with the Russian Federation, which is long been a good partner of New Delhi and is apprehensive of the religious policies of Islamabad in the region. The policy of Pakistan at that time to support the Taliban against the Soviet Union to have a friendly government in Kabul undermined other crucial strategic objectives like good relationships with its Central Asian neighbours. The presence of Tajik, Uzbek, and other insurgents in the tribal regions of Pakistan had also hampered the efforts of the country to strengthen its links with Central Asia. Central Asian governments were concerned about linkages between the Hizb-ut-Tahrir and IMU, as well as the Islamic Jihad Union and Pakistani militants. Pakistan faces many significant impediments

that limit its capacity to tackle counterterrorism issues (Singh,2015). However, Islamabad has continued military operations against these insurgents in its tribal regions along the Durand line since 2004, which has resulted in the eradication of these militants and improved ties between the two countries. However, the underlying goals that drive Pakistani and Central Asian governments remain steady, focusing on trade and economic interests as well as fundamental political goodwill, which is the potential of Pakistan as a major trade and energy corridor recognised by all CARs.

Another issue created by terrorism that affected Pakistan relations and its interests in Central Asia is the poor security situation in tribal districts and Balochistan areas near the Durand line. It is also a main hurdle in the completion of connectivity projects that Islamabad pursues in the shape of railway lines, roads and energy pipelines between the two regions: South Asia and Central Asia (Asif,2011). Likewise, to make Gwadar port the hub of regional trade, it is also necessary to ensure peace in Balochistan and the security of foreign workers, mainly Chinese, who are working on the project. A separatist rebellion has hindered sustainable development, growth, and progress in Balochistan, the centuries-old Sardari system, and people's feelings of absence of share in their local natural reservoirs. Terrorism and targeted assassinations along sectarian and ethnic lines have worsened the chaos in this economically and strategically significant region of the country. This might disturb the TAPI pipeline and its security. Islamabad's financial interests and role as a corridor for energy resources of CARs are mainly dependent on how the insecurity and unrest in the region, particularly in Balochistan, is dealt with, as well as how the people's grievances are dealt with in a prudent manner that will help in gaining their trust. Otherwise, the deadlock would continue to prevent Pakistan from realising the benefits of its ports. Even if the Gwadar Port is fully operationalized, the security situation must be greatly improved to make this port an economic centre. The security situation in the province remains unstable. Though terrorism has wreaked havoc throughout Pakistan, but still the province is one of the worst-affected regions of the country. Also, the relationship between peace and economic activities is essential. Therefore, economic activities cannot continue without peace, and peace and stability without development may not be sustainable. Ethnicity, illiteracy, economic disparity, inflation, rapid population growth, high joblessness rate, poverty,

political instability, and injustice are all factors that contribute to terrorism (Zakaria,2019). However, in the last few years, from 2017 to 2020, terrorism has declined in Balochistan, but again, it has increased since 2021 (Table 1), but the roots of extremism persist.

Table (1): Year-wise Terrorist Attacks and Deaths in Balochistan from 2000 to 2024

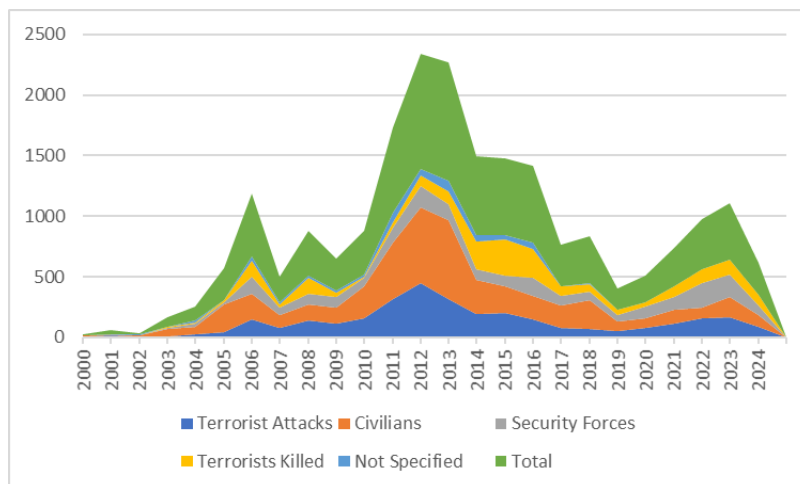
Year	Terrorist Attacks	Civilians	Security Forces	Terrorists Killed	Not Specified	Total
2000	8	9	0	0	0	9
2001	14	4	4	1	4	33
2002	8	6	2	4	1	13
2003	7	60	15	3	0	78
2004	22	61	26	10	20	117
2005	41	228	24	12	2	266
2006	146	215	140	130	34	519
2007	78	105	64	27	16	212
2008	142	134	88	131	16	369
2009	117	128	88	39	12	267
2010	158	264	66	9	20	359
2011	319	465	120	45	77	707
2012	447	624	177	86	58	945
2013	319	648	128	113	86	975
2014	190	286	82	230	53	651
2015	204	216	87	302	31	636
2016	148	191	154	233	58	636
2017	82	181	78	82	0	341
2018	69	234	75	65	9	383
2019	48	83	54	43	0	180
2020	76	84	94	37	0	215
2021	112	116	107	90	0	313
2022	160	88	202	116	0	406
2023	169	160	186	125	0	471
2024	83	103	79	83	0	265
Total	3168	4718	2140	2017	497	9372

(Source: South Asia Terrorism Portal. <https://www.satp.org/datasheet-terrorist-attack/fatalities/pakistan-balochistan>)

From 2013 to 2030, terrorist attacks in Pakistan have declined, but since 2021, terrorism again increased in the province (Figure 1). It is not a good sign for Pakistan because terrorism has significantly affected all types of economic activities across the country. China is developing the Gwadar port, but there are increasing attacks on the Chinese, which potentially affect the operationalization and prospects of the Gwadar port. If peace and

stability are maintained in Balochistan, then Gwadar Port will be able to become a bridge between South and Central Asia. Undeniably, the volatile region cannot become a secure transit and transport corridor without effective law and order. The private sector shareholders will not invest such large amounts without insurance against security risks. Other regional players, such as CARs, will be skeptical regarding their trade through Gwadar port.

Figure (1): Year-wise Terrorist Attacks and Deaths in Balochistan from 2000 to 2024



5. Conclusion

Pakistan aspires to gain access to the Central Asian markets via Afghanistan, but the access is limited due to the insecurity in the country. Pakistan also wants to provide access to sea to Central Asia through its Gwadar and Karachi ports. A stable and economically prosperous Afghanistan secures Pakistan's regional trade and economic agenda. Peace and stability in Afghanistan are essential for Pakistan's smooth economic ties and connectivity with Central Asia because Afghanistan works as a bridge between the two regions. Therefore, Pakistan wishes peace in Afghanistan and is struggling through different ways and means to restore peace. In this regard, Islamabad played a vital role in bringing the Afghan Taliban and the US to the negotiation table. However, the US again moved the goalposts farther for Pakistan. Its military withdrawal without finding

any suitable solution to the Afghan issue affected Pakistan and its interests in the region.

Peace in Afghanistan is important to ensure the materialization of Islamabad's regional interests. Peace will surely improve trade and other types of economic relations and connectivity between Central Asia and Pakistan and, at the same time, will also contribute to making Afghanistan the transit hub of the region. Pakistan is eager for peace in Afghanistan, which it sees as critical for regional integration and its foreign policy objectives in Central Asia as well as in Afghanistan. Any attempt by Pakistan to bring pipelines or energy from Central Asia would be costly and difficult to maintain until the country's stabilisation. Foreign investors hesitate to invest in any venture in such an unstable circumstance. Pakistan and Central Asia would be able to carry out their plans to form a regional economic union once there is stability in the country. A powerful central government is required to resolve the Afghan crisis and restore peace.

All shortest routes from Pakistan to Central Asia are passing through Afghanistan. Even the misfortune is that Tajikistan is separated by a narrow 16 km Wakhan strip from Pakistan, which is now only accessible to Pakistan through China and Afghanistan. Therefore, Pakistan is working on the restoration of peace in Afghanistan by actively participating in the peace process as well as giving aid and assistance to the state-building process in Afghanistan, which is one of the main causes of terrorism, militancy and instability in Afghanistan.

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