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## Pakistan and the West: Navigating Terrorism and Counterterrorism in the Post 9/11 International Order

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### ABSTRACT

The present study analyses Pakistan's strategic position in the US-led 'War on Terror' following the 9/11 attacks, focusing on the implications of its geopolitical position. Owing to Pakistan's connected boundary with Afghanistan and its geopolitical and geostrategic location in South Asia, Pakistan was positioned as a frontline country in the US-led War on Terror. The then-President, General Pervez Musharraf, decided to collaborate with the United States in response to shift the global dynamics, demanding military bases, intelligence sharing, and logistical support. The US and the West formally acknowledged Pakistan as a 'major non-NATO ally' and provided financial as well as military assistance. This research critically examines Pakistan's policy-shifting dynamics in the swiftly transforming geopolitics since 2001 and addresses the country's dual role in domestic security and counterterrorism. It draws attention to the tense ties with the West after the 'Operation Neptune Spear' and the inadvertent tilt towards China and Russia. This piece of paper sums up the after-effects of American drone strikes in Pakistan's tribal regions, resulting in significant civilian casualties, sparking public outrage and security concerns. Pakistan had an unparalleled surge in terrorism at home, which led to the implementation of massive military campaigns like operations Rah-e-Nijat, Zarb-e-Azb, and Radd-ul-Fasaad to quell the insurgencies. These actions weakened insurgent networks and led to social and economic upheavals in the country. The research article concludes that how Pakistan's early geopolitical significance was consolidated by its alliance with the West. However, the concurrent events of countering the Afghanistan dilemma and the unceasing US reliability culminated in a complicated legacy of impediments that still haunt Pakistan's internal and external affairs.

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**Keywords:** Pakistan and the West, Terrorism and Counterterrorism, Geopolitics in South Asia, Taliban, Al-Qaeda, 9/11 and International Security.

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## INTRODUCTION

The attacks of September 11, 2001, altered international security measures and apprehensions, driving counterterrorism to the center of global politics. For Pakistan, whose geopolitical location and domestic dynamics made it crucial to Western security interests, the post 9/11 period-brought unprecedented challenges and incentives? Pakistan's strategic partnership with the West, mainly the United States, became defined by a complex coercion, mistrust, and interplay of intended cooperation. Besides this, before 9/11, Pakistan maintained a complicated relationship with militant groups, operating in Kashmir and Afghanistan, often shaped by its conflict with India and quest for strategic penetration. Following the U.S. declaration of a global "War on Terror" (WOT), Pakistan faced a dual choice; risk international isolation or support the West's counterterrorism campaign. As a result, Pakistan chose the second option, and became a "major non-NATO ally" and opened its logistical routes and airspace for the U.S. operations in Afghanistan. Pakistan officially denied any support for the Taliban regime. The alignment with the West was itself driven by both pressures, such as incentives, diplomatic legitimacy, aid, debt relief, or threats of being labelled a rogue state. Attacks by *Tehrik-i-Taliban* Pakistan (TTP) surged, leading to military operations such as Operation *Rah-e-Nijat*, Operation *Zarb-e-Azb*, and Operation *Radd-ul-Fasaad*. However, the militant groups harbored by Pakistan turned into its worst foes, causing unabated civil unrest and chaos in the country. The majority of Pakistanis deemed Western involvement as a violation of sovereignty, particularly drone strikes in Pakistan's territory, which disrupted the regional stability.

Nevertheless, this distrust complicated political cooperation with the West. At the same time, the U.S. drone strikes in Pakistan's tribal areas became one of the most combative issues. On the one hand, these drones were a precise tool targeting al-Qaeda, high-value militants and prevented attacks on regional allies and Western soil. On the other hand, from Pakistan's perspective, these drone strikes damaged its sovereignty and territorial integrity. They fueled anti-state sentiments and radicalization. Several civilian casualties became a rallying point for debating extremist recruitment narratives. Although, Pakistan and the West both pursued stability in Afghanistan, their strategic end-goals deviated.

Meanwhile, Pakistan was preventing Indian influence in Afghanistan, and especially by maintaining a bonding policy with the Taliban regime. In contrast, the West aimed to disassemble terrorist networks and build a functioning state in Afghanistan. This deviation produced mutual mistrust, particularly after the detection of Osama bin Laden (1957-2011) in Pakistan, Abbottabad, in 2011. There were multiple allegations elevated that militant groups targeted Pakistan's security apparatus. However, after 9/11, the international order shifting towards the East, China emerging as superpower, the U.S. focusing towards the Indo-Pacific, and Pakistan recalibrating its external dealings.

## **From Tradition to Transformation: Pakistan's Strategic Policy Evolution**

The 2001 terrorist attacks in Washington fundamentally repositioned Pakistan as a pivotal actor in the US-led War on Terror. The affiliation was the direct output of Islamabad's indispensable strategic location near the neck of Kabul. At home, the curse of terrorism had totally destabilized its socio-political state of affairs.<sup>1</sup> A distinguished Pakistani scholar, Hassan Askari Rizvi, argues that Pakistan's foreign policy during this period was defined by realpolitik, balancing the demands of its international alliance with the US due to its domestic needs for security, economic aid, and military modernisation.<sup>2</sup> The 9/11 incident dynamically altered international politics and had an inexorable impact on countries around the world, particularly in South Asia.<sup>3</sup>

In socio-strategic spheres, Pakistan witnessed turmoil<sup>4</sup> and suffered horrendous losses, fighting someone's war, by being a frontline fighter.<sup>5</sup> The country transformed its ways of dealing with Afghanistan and consolidated its arguments to counter challenges in its diplomatic efforts to behind the cause of the Kashmir movement.<sup>6</sup> The nation's internal militancy and counterterrorism efforts resulted in the deformation of institutional stability and brought up persistent social issues that plagued the populace. Pakistan is therefore viewed as one of the vulnerable states that suffered strategic and economic losses since 9/11.<sup>7</sup> In accordance with Pakistan's foreign policy; it has been vitally influenced by US pressure, leading to swift transformations. As Hassan Askari posits, foreign Policy is the set of measures and approaches a state that takes control of its interactions with other countries and international organizations to protect its interests and ensure its continued existence.<sup>8</sup> The 9/11 attacks, which established Pakistan as a pivotal ally in the U.S.-led War on Terror, served as the impetus for the change.

### **Pakistan at the Crossroads: Strategic and Political Choice Post 9/11**

Following the 9/11 attacks, Pakistan leveraged its geopolitical position by collaborating with NATO forces. However, Pakistan's role became critical in 2001 when U.S. and NATO forces carried out military operations against the Taliban and al-Qaeda, and Pakistan supplied crucial logistical support, intelligence cooperation, and access to military bases. As Todd Sandler documented, Islamabad considered the event a climactic moment to strengthen its faltering economy and raise its military might by collaborating with Washington.<sup>9</sup>

Hassan Askari emphasizes that Pakistan's partnership with the United States posed considerable risks and presented a historic opportunity to address the country's strategic vulnerability, policy constraints, and domestic doldrums. Islamabad benefited from significant financial support and international recognition of Pakistan's strategic position, but it also exacerbated internal political conundrums. Islamist groups in Pakistan fiercely opposed the U.S. alliance, considering it a betrayal to Islamic unity.<sup>10</sup> This stimulated the spread of extremism and fanned internal dissension, forcing the Pakistan's officials to perform a delicate balancing act

between orthodox terrorists and the U.S. agents. However, Pakistan exposed to complicate domestic and regional influences, even as its geopolitical prominence gave it an indispensable position on the international juncture.

### **Hegemony and Global Security Post 9/11**

Terrorism did not emanate on September 11, 2001; instead, coordinated attacks that day claimed 3000 lives, redefined the global security priorities and stimulated an unprecedented international war on terrorism.<sup>11</sup> On September 11, thousands of people were slain in less than ninety minutes.<sup>12</sup> No terrorist attempt has ever killed more than 500 people at once, before the Pentagon and the World Trade Centre attacks.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, by any measure, the attacks on September 11 were peerless in their intensity and havoc in intent.<sup>14</sup>

The terrorist demonstration could destabilize a superpower. The United States pledged to crush the root cause of incidents, al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden, with iron hands. The superpowers, Russia, China and other Western nations advocated for the US. Stance. Since then, most states have agreed that collective action against terrorism is unquestionable and, underpins global efforts. Following the bombings, the UN General Assembly urged its member nations to participate in international efforts to fight against terrorism. It vehemently denounced the acts, calling them a crime against humanity. The UN called on its members to make sure that terrorists are neither aided nor assisted by their homelands.<sup>15</sup> Washington considered al-Qaeda to be the main culprit behind the 9/11 attacks. The US wrath too burst over the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, which provided al-Qaeda a haven and unrestricted operations, was also found to be culpable. The United States launched a joint military campaign to take punitive actions against the Taliban and al-Qaeda. This reaction ushered in a new period of global cooperation.

### **Alleged Conspiracies and Alternate Narratives of the 9/11 Tragedy**

Numerous conspiracy theories have appeared and shaped the structure of the 9/11 incident. According to a considerable theory, the U.S. government planned the 9/11 attacks as an inside job to defend its wars in Afghanistan and Iraq to gain control of their natural resources. The former for its opium-producing fields, which generate millions in revenue, and the latter for its oil-rich territory. Because of the size of the impact and the absence of apparent wreckage, it is alleged that a missile, not an American Airlines Flight 77, was responsible for the damage to the Pentagon. As proof of insider trading, theories also claim that the U.S. government ordered air defenses to halt or draw attention to unusual stock market activity before the strikes.<sup>16</sup>

Given that 15 of the 19 hijackers were Saudi nationals, controversial allegations have been suggested that Saudi Arabia was involved or that Israel's Mossad was influencing U.S. foreign policy.<sup>17</sup> From extreme hypotheses, even say that the footage was fabricated, refuting the presence of planes. Others contend that the group was used as a scapegoat by larger state or corporate interests or that the group's involvement was overstated.<sup>18</sup> Despite their persistence, these hypotheses have been extensively denounced by investigations, such as the 9/11 Commission

Report, which linked the attacks to Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda. The technical experts have verified that structural deterioration and fires, not controlled demolition, caused the towers to collapse. Nevertheless, these hypotheses reflect the public's effort to understand a complex and horrific event.

### **The US-Pakistan Strategic Partnership**

Owing to the strategic location and ties to the Taliban regime, Pakistan's policies came under scrutiny after the incident of September 11, 2001. Pakistan's military and intelligence services maintained complex relations with Taliban, which it had previously backed. Furthermore, any U.S.-led military action in the area would have required Pakistan's indispensable support due to its lengthy and porous border with the country.<sup>19</sup> Pakistan strategically chose to turn its back on the Taliban government after realizing the destruction wrought by the 9/11 attacks and the change in the international community's behavior. By aligning itself with international interests, as stated in UN General Assembly resolutions that urged member states to combat terrorism, the government joined the global counterterrorism efforts.<sup>20</sup> In addition to this, being a deliberate response to international pressure, this alignment served to safeguard Pakistan's primary strategic interests. Pakistan sought to secure its territory, protect its nuclear program, uphold its stance on the Kashmir dispute and boost its faltering economy by collaborating with the United States and the larger international community.<sup>21</sup>

This decision marked a dramatic shift in Pakistan's policy, bringing it closer to international counterterrorism initiatives while safeguarding its long-term strategic goals amid a swiftly changing global landscape. After the 9/11 incident, Pakistan's support for the West, especially the United States, became a pillar of its strategic partnership. Pakistan granted its airspace to U.S. planes carrying out military operations in Afghanistan as part of its allegiance to the international counterterrorism campaign. As Hassan Askari argued, to support American military activities logistically and in emergencies, Pakistan also permitted the United States to use three small airports in Sindh and Baluchistan. The United States' military operations against the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan were made attainable in large part by this collaboration.<sup>22</sup>

The military and intelligence services of both nations worked closely to provide critical intelligence on terrorist organizations that operated in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The U.S. security and intelligence forces collaborated with their Pakistani counterparts in coordinated efforts to eliminate the remaining al-Qaeda and Taliban elements that had escaped from Afghanistan and sought refuge in Pakistan.<sup>23</sup> To combat the Taliban's presence inside Pakistan's borders, the U.S. military put pressure on Pakistan to step up efforts to expel Taliban fighters who had taken up residence there. Despite the intrinsic difficulties and resistance, this alignment consolidated Pakistan's strategic partnership with the West and cemented its status as a crucial ally in the War on Terror.<sup>24</sup>

### **The Domestic Paradox: Pakistan in a Complex Position**

Numerous notorious al-Qaeda members sought safety in Pakistan's tribal agencies, following the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. The tribal areas served as a haven for terrorists, who had previously participated in deadly acts in Afghanistan. In June 2003, Pakistan sent troops to the tribal areas in response to the unabated threats posed by insurgents.<sup>25</sup> To defeat the extremist networks that had sought sanctuary in these regions, Pakistan's military forces initiated several operations. Annihilating former Afghan militants, such as Taliban and al-Qaeda members, who were concocting bombings in Pakistan, was the main objective of the operations. As militants reorganized in the region, these military operations were wittingly extended. The complicated nature of the insurgencies operating near the porous border of Afghanistan, the prevalence of local tribal affiliations that occasionally protected militants, and the challenging terrain presented significant problems for the Pakistani military during these operations.<sup>26</sup> Notwithstanding these obstacles, Pakistan remained committed to fighting terrorism in the tribal areas, displaying its strategic partnership with the West in the international counterterrorism initiatives.

However, domestic concerns accompanied Pakistan's position as a crucial non-NATO ally in the US-led War on Terror. Disputes over divisive topics, including militant sanctuaries and US drone operations, stressed public opinion and state stability. Although Pakistan's collaboration with the United States was indispensable for counterterrorism initiatives, it exacerbated internal conflicts and stoked animosity.<sup>27</sup> Public sentiments and the response of Islamist organizations were two critical factors. Pakistan's unflinching advocacy for the United States was quite disruptive, especially among political and religious groups that blindly advocated for the Afghan Taliban and al-Qaeda. These organizations deemed Pakistan's backing of American military actions as a betrayal of regional and ideological interests. Drone strikes in Pakistan's tribal areas, targeting militants, seriously injured civilians' empathy towards the incumbent government. As extremist organizations attempted to capitalize on anti-American emotions and mobilize mass support against the government, the ensuing public outcry helped to fuel an increase in domestic terrorism. Pervez Musharraf (1943-2023) made considered but perilous decisions to align with the United States. Musharraf realized that joining the global coalition would have strategic and financial advantages, including improved international legitimacy, debt relief, and military assistance. However, a series of unflinching domestic backlash emanated from this move, especially from militant organizations and Islamic parties who deemed the U.S. alliance as a direct danger to Islam.<sup>28</sup> Pakistan's alignment with the NATO coalition created a persistent strategic dilemma, compelling the state to balance its commitments to the United States with mounting domestic opposition to the American-led intervention in Afghanistan. This dichotomy-highlighted Pakistan's predicament at the time; striking a balance between its strategic goals and foreign commitments and the growing tide of internal unrest and public dissatisfaction. Pakistan's involvement in the War on Terror is

complex and frequently dangerous, as seen by the complexities in dealing with the grievances above.

### **From Pariah to Partner: Relief and the Recalibration of US-Pakistan Partnership**

The United States has heretofore provided military and economic assistance to Pakistan to enhance bilateral cooperation in the War on Terror. In addition, the United States lifted three sorts of economic sanctions that had been imposed earlier in October and November 2001. As it paved the way for fresh collaboration in several areas of shared interests, this signaled a gigantic change in US-Pakistan partnership.<sup>29</sup>

The U.S. provided Pakistan with cutting-edge weapons and military hardware as part of the partnership programme. Enhancing Islamabad's military capabilities to curb terrorism. The programme encouraged greater cooperation between the two countries in tackling common security dilemmas.<sup>30</sup> This period of amplified involvement demonstrated Pakistan's strategic significance in the global war against terrorism, acting as a bridge between the US-Pakistan volatile relations. Following the 9/11 attacks, the then-Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf secured the crucial choice to join the international coalition against terrorism. Musharraf justified this shift in approach by saying that Pakistan is fighting terrorism alongside the world community, since terrorism concerns everyone on the planet, including Pakistan; therefore, it has pledged to follow this course. It was unquestionably a significant transformation in Pakistan's foreign policy shift and its geopolitical stance in the world. Both domestic and cross-border factors influenced Musharraf's choice. The interplanetary was left for political maneuvering in being neutral on the global stage, all due to the culminating consensus against terrorism worldwide.

#### **The US Assistance to Pakistan**

The United States has provided Pakistan with a variety of direct aid, with an emphasis on both short-term security requirements and long-term development objectives. Fiscal assistance, technical and commodity help, and initiatives to improve trade relations have all been a part of this support. Much of this assistance has been allocated to bolster vital areas, including food security, health, education, democracy, and the eradication of child labor. Additionally, reflecting the broader scope of the US-Pakistan partnership, counter-narcotics activities have also been prioritised.<sup>31</sup> As part of its cooperation in the War on Terror, the United States provided Pakistan with valuable economic support in 2002-2003. This includes about \$455 million set aside for various development initiatives meant to improve the nation's socioeconomic circumstances, as well as \$600 million in budgetary support. Pakistan was compensated for providing facilities and logistical support to US forces stationed in the areas, in addition to these direct contributions.

There is claim that the Taliban and al-Qaeda have mainly revitalized because of their capacity to establish a refuge in Pakistan has angered Americans of all political persuasions.

Because Washington funded the Pakistani military for its counterterrorism efforts

with approximately \$1 billion a year and has given Islamabad nearly \$10 billion in overt security and economic support since 2002.<sup>32</sup> In the security domain, the U.S. assistance has been directed towards enhancing Pakistan's institutional capacity for counterterrorism and internal security governance, with a particular emphasis on stabilizing the volatile Pak-Afghan frontier. This has included providing financial and technical assistance to strengthen counterterrorism initiatives, support law enforcement agencies and capacity building, and improve border security.<sup>33</sup> Projects have focused on enhancing road infrastructure in tribal areas, expanding communication networks, and installing cutting-edge record-keeping systems at border entry and exit points. These steps are intended to monitor cross-border activities and ceaseless illicit movements, and to elevate Pakistan's capacity to address security concerns. Pakistan's strategic magnitude in regional security and international counterterrorism initiatives is reflected in this multidimensional strategy.<sup>34</sup>

Pakistan benefited from generous economic aid from international financial organizations, including the World Bank (WB), the Asian Development Bank (ADB), and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), as well as U.S. assistance.<sup>35</sup> These grants were allocated into various significant sectors like poverty alleviation, social development programs and state institution capacity building. A renowned scholar of military affairs, Ayesha Siddiqa draws attention to the military's dual role as a counterterrorism force and a factor in Pakistan's foreign policy. She claims that Pakistan's military leadership secured external aid and used the War on Terror to bolster its internal authority.<sup>36</sup> Pakistan's economy stabilized during a difficult time because of a mix of bilateral and international assistance, which also helped the country tackle its security and development issues.<sup>37</sup>

#### **Multilateral Debt Alleviation: Japan and the European Union**

Pakistan gained substantial debt relief and economic assistance from international allies following its alliance with the West in the War on Terror. The Paris Club, also known as the Aid to Pakistan Consortium, suggested in December 2001 that Pakistan's \$12.5 billion in debt be rescheduled for 38 years, including a 15-years grace period. To reduce Pakistan's debt repayment burden, this choice was crucial, likewise, Japan and the European Union offered trade concessions, debt relief, and economic support, while the United States rescheduled and, in effect, paid off its debts. These actions provided Pakistan with the broader fiscal room it needed to stabilize its economy and focus on enacting key reforms.<sup>38</sup> During General Pervez Musharraf's June 2003 visit to the United States, the then-U.S. President George W. Bush (2001-2009) announced \$3 billion five-years economic assistance plan beginning in 2004-2005, providing additional financial help. This package contained money for military purchases, economic development, and the construction of medical and educational facilities. The two countries also inked a Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA), which is a first step towards a possible free trade agreement. Additionally, a science and technology cooperation agreement was signed, highlighting the diverse scope of U.S.-Pakistan cooperation. In addition

to easing Pakistan's financial difficulties, these actions improved its capacity to meet developmental goals and deepen its strategic alliances with critical international actors.<sup>39</sup>

### **Strategies for Counterterrorism**

To combat the challenges that militancy and extremism pose both internally and externally, Pakistan has implemented a multifaceted strategy that includes military, legislative, and intelligence measures.

**(i) Military Operations:** To dismantle extremist networks, Pakistan initiated large-scale military operations. In this regard, Operation *Rah-e-Nijat* (Path to Salvation) was a major military operation launched by the Pakistan Army in October 2009 in South Waziristan. The prime objectives were to eliminate *Tehrik-e-Taliban* Pakistan (TTP) leadership and militants based in South Waziristan and disassemble their command-and-control structure, training camps, and strongholds, and establish the writ of the state in the tribal region. In the same way, the *Tehrik-i-Taliban* Pakistan (TTP) and al-Qaeda members were the targets of the other historic Operation *Zarb-e-Azb* (Sharp, decisive strike), which was conducted in 2014 in North Waziristan, aimed to annihilate their strongholds. Several terrorist networks were effectively destroyed, which also reduced regional violence. For the same reason, Operation *Radd-ul-Fasaad* (Elimination of Discord) was directed in 2017, a national campaign to curb domestic terrorism and sectarian extremism. However, the operation *Radd-ul-Fasaad*, unlike the operation *Zarb-e-Azb*, broadened its scope to include metropolitan areas and addressed a wider range of radical beliefs and violent operations. Although conflicting national interests frequently hampered this cooperation, it caused mistrust within the state.<sup>40</sup>

**(ii) Anti-Terrorism Laws:** Pakistan's efforts were further strengthened by the enactment of stronger anti-terrorism laws. To improve cooperation between military and civilian organizations and enable a coordinated response to the threat of terrorism, the National Counter-Terrorism Authority (NACTA) was established in 2008.

**(iii) Intelligence Sharing:** To reach high-profile targets, Pakistan strengthened its coordination with international intelligence organizations, especially the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). In Pakistan, Abbottabad raid highlighted an unmitigated trust and strained ties, raising concerns about Islamabad's sovereignty and the US certainty. However, the alliance was essential in providing deterrence against proliferating terrorism, and the killing of Osama bin Laden in 2011 was part of it, and the operation, code-named Operation Neptune Spear was ordered by the then-U.S. President Barack Obama (2009-2017).<sup>41</sup>

**(iv) Surveillance of Religious Seminaries:** Pakistan stepped up its surveillance of religious seminaries suspected of spreading radical teachings after realizing the influence of extremist ideas. The difficulties of tackling deeply ingrained cultural and spiritual elements are reflected in the inconsistent enforcement of attempts to control and reform these institutions. Although there are still obstacles to bridge, Pakistan has achieved commendable progress in its counterterrorism operations.

Long-term stability still relies upon resolving security dilemmas, improving cooperation within the country's institutions, and uprooting the roots of extremism.<sup>42</sup>

### **Bush Doctrine and Its Consequences**

Much criticism has been levelled against the abuse of American power, precisely in relation to the War on Terror. Bush administration has adopted an assertive strategic posture in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, launching military engagements, particularly in Iraq and Afghanistan. While the elimination of al-Qaeda was the core objective, the United States' frequent indiscriminate use of military force had unforeseen effects.<sup>43</sup> The War on Terror, according to the critics, turned into a drawn-out and expensive confrontation that incentivized regional instability, stoked anti-American sentiments and gulped civilian lives in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Todd Sandler rightly pointed out that a significant weakness in the Bush administration's strategy was that it was based on an inaccurate analogy between the existential risks of fascism and terrorism.<sup>44</sup>

This resulted in persistent abuse of American power, a misinterpretation of the threat, and a misrepresentation of the war's actual goals. America's emphasis on military fixes, together with measures like drone strikes and increased questioning, hurt its reputation internationally and undermined its moral authority.<sup>45</sup> Concerns about the unbridled use of bombardments camouflaged as national security were further illustrated by the degradation of civil freedoms both at home and abroad. Consequently, several people believe that the abusive American power is a fundamental hurdle stunting stability and growth in contemporary Afghanistan.

### **Dilemmas and Divergences in US-Pakistan Strategic Ties**

The critics have also scrutinized the Pakistan-US strategic ties and their durability. Analysts in Pakistan predicted that circumstances would swiftly change upon the completion of Washington's objectives, and that Islamabad would be abandoned. The concerns were real and were based on exorbitant past experiences in which the U.S. deserted Pakistan after pursuing short-term geopolitical goals.<sup>46</sup> During a visit to Islamabad on March 18, 2004, the U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell (1937-2001) sought to allay these fears by declaring that the U.S. government would begin the process of classifying Pakistan as a major non-NATO ally. The purpose of this classification was to emphasize the connection between the United States and Pakistan's long-term significance. Powell emphasized on April 2 in Berlin that Pakistan is the strongest US ally in the fight against terrorism, and the US wants to build up and strengthen its institutions. Alongside assurances of sustained economic and scientific cooperation, sectoral collaboration, and preferential access to military hardware, the United States also underscored its diplomatic endorsement of Pakistan. This designation was interpreted as a step toward reaffirming Pakistan's position as a vital U.S. ally and indicating a commitment going beyond short-term counterterrorism objectives.<sup>47</sup>

However, despite these guarantees, the relationship remained tense, affecting geopolitical agendas and divergent national interests. A limited group of countries,

including Japan, Philippines, South Korea, and New Zealand, were deemed essential to U.S. security and economic interests when Pakistan was designated as a major non-NATO ally. This position did little to ease the underlying tensions and mistrust that have historically characterized Pakistan-U.S. ties, even if it represented Pakistan's strategic significance in the War on Terror.<sup>48</sup> The widespread anti-American rhetoric of political parties, especially Islamic groups sympathizing with al-Qaeda and ties to the Taliban, was one of the main elements of worry in the Pakistan-US relationship. These organizations questioned Pakistan's ties to the United States, heightening widespread skepticism about the legitimacy and sustainability of the bilateral partnership.<sup>49</sup>

The ties between Pakistan and the United States were tainted by mistrust, despite Pakistan's crucial contribution to counterterrorism efforts. The 2011 Abbottabad raid, in which American soldiers killed Osama bin Laden without first consulting the Pakistani government, is a stark illustration of the erosion of trust.<sup>50</sup> This unilateral decision further deepened the bilateral trust deficit and reinforced popular perceptions that the United States employed Pakistan instrumentally to advance its short-term strategic objectives. The amount that Pakistan has contributed to the "War on Terror" considerably outweighs its size and might. Over 35,000 people died in Pakistan to protect Americans from another 9/11 attack. Even though Pakistan had suffered an economic loss of \$ 67 billion US, the US remained frustrated with its performance and continued to put pressure on it to "Do More".<sup>51</sup>

As eminent philosopher and writer Noam Chomsky critically noted that Pakistan's policies in the War on Terror reflect the broader contradictions of U.S. foreign policy, support for authoritarian regimes while claiming to fight for freedom and democracy.<sup>52</sup> This criticism draws attention to the fundamental contradiction in the U.S.-Pakistan relations, where political and ideological disagreements frequently collide with strategic collaboration. In the end, although Pakistan's importance in U.S. foreign policy was highlighted by its designation as a primary non-NATO ally, the underlying problems of mistrust and conflicting interests could not be resolved.<sup>53</sup> Despite its significance, the collaboration remained brittle, molded more by a history of transactional relationships and geopolitical events than by a true congruence of objectives and principles.

### **The Afghan Jihad Legacy and Pakistan**

Pakistan's engagement with Afghanistan has historically been shaped by a delicate strategic balancing act, a dynamic that became even more pronounced following the U.S.-led intervention in Afghanistan after 9/11. Pakistan's historical ties to the Taliban, a group it had assisted in bringing to power in the 1990s, left it in a highly precarious position even if it formally supported the U.S. effort in Afghanistan. As a result, Pakistan's policy became complex: it had to balance preserving good relations with the Afghan government, supported by the US, to form a stable democratic state, as well as its Taliban proxies, to remain relevant in the politics of Afghanistan.<sup>54</sup>

Tensions with Afghanistan were exacerbated by this dual loyalty, which not only ruined Pakistan's reputation on the global stage. Including that, the Afghan government and the international community frequently accused Pakistan of hosting Taliban fighters within its borders, harboring cross-border terrorist activities. Given the complicated geopolitical environment and the growing hostility between the two nations, these allegations created uninvited obstacles.<sup>55</sup> Afghanistan publicly denounced Pakistan for allegedly affiliating with Taliban activities, which fueled the country's continued instability, under the administrations of Hamid Karzai and then Ashraf Ghani. Resultantly, Pakistan's ambiguous stance in Afghanistan, coupled with accusations of harboring militants, strained its relations with Kabul and complicated its role in the broader regional and international efforts stabilize Afghanistan. The situation foregrounded the wider challenge of aligning regional interests with international security objectives, creating a complex web of relationships rife with contradictions and unresolved tensions.<sup>56</sup> Militants' use of the porous border for cross-border attacks further strained Pak-Afghan relations.

#### **Pakistan-India: A Strained Relation amidst War on Terror**

Following the 9/11 attacks, Pakistan's relationship with India underwent a period of tension and re-evaluation in the framework of regional and international diplomacy. India opposed the renewed Pakistan-U.S. alliance, especially Pakistan's pivotal role in the U.S. counterterrorism policy, even though it supported the U.S.-led War on Terror.<sup>57</sup> Concerns were raised by Indian politicians regarding Pakistan's past connections to the Taliban and its backing of militant organizations engaged in insurgency, especially in Indian-administered Kashmir. Contending that Pakistan's support for Islamist fighters crossing into Indian territory constituted the principal driver of the regional insurgency. The Indian government pressed the United States to redefine terrorism to include terrorist actions in Kashmir, based in Pakistan.<sup>58</sup>

After a string of violent events, including the attack on the Indian Parliament, agitation between India and Pakistan reached a threshold in late May 2002. The United States, the United Kingdom and the European Union intervened diplomatically to stop the situation from worsening into a nuclear conflict. The then-Prime Minister of Pakistan, Mir Zafarullah Khan Jamali (2002-2004), proposed a truce along the Line of Control (LOC) in Kashmir in November 2003, which denoted a crucial point of transition. Despite its initial reluctance, India responded favorably, and on November 26, 2003, a truce was put into effect.<sup>59</sup> President Musharraf hinted at a shift in Pakistan's long-standing stance on Kashmir in December 2003, offering greater leeway in future talks. Despite persistent underlying tensions, this period, nonetheless, offered a window for diplomatic engagement between the two nuclear-armed states.<sup>60</sup>

Cross-border militancy remained a significant thorn in the side despite these détente measures. Pakistan was criticized for its alleged support for Kashmiri militants and for being connected to significant terrorist incidents at global level, including the Indian Parliament attack in 2001 and the Mumbai attacks in 2008. These instances attempted to terminate decades of animosity even more strenuous

because Pakistan voiced its struggle against terrorism, while India persisted in accusing Pakistan of harboring and assisting militants. As a result, there were periods of diplomatic reconciliation. However, the Kashmir dispute and cross-border militancy remained major hurdles in Indo-Pak relations, continuing to shape regional and international diplomatic dynamics.

### **Sino-Pakistan Strategic Cooperation in the Post 9/11 Period**

Over time, Pakistan's partnership with China has deepened into a comprehensive strategic alliance spanning political, military, and economic fields. Beijing has served as a pivotal source of financial assistance and technological expertise, playing a decisive role in key development projects, most notably the construction of the deep-sea port at Gwadar. In particular, providing China access to vital trade routes in the Arabian Sea, this partnership has solidified Pakistan's economic development and underpinned its regional distinctivity.<sup>61</sup>

In addition, China has been a staunch advocate of Pakistan's counterterrorism initiatives, praising Pakistan's commendable strategy in combating extremism. Beijing has sought Pakistan's assistance in suppressing dissent in the Xinjiang province, which contains a substantial Muslim majority. Shared strategic objectives and converging regional security concerns have further consolidated the Pak-China partnership, often portrayed as a model of enduring bilateral friendship.<sup>62</sup> Aforementioned dilemma highlighted in 2004 when a Chechen activist was detained in the Wana region, which is prominent for its cross-border connections with tribal areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan. However, while Pakistan has worked hard to keep a balanced relationship with both China and Russia, its engagement with Moscow has primarily focused on curbing the activities of extremist groups operating along the Pak-Afghan border. In response, Russia has backed Pakistan's efforts to combat terrorism, particularly in regions close to Afghanistan, where many of these extremist organizations have taken up residence. Although China and Russia have both contributed significantly to Pakistan's strategic goals, the dynamics of regional security and the changing character of international relations continue to determine their influence on Pakistan's overall foreign policy.<sup>63</sup> However, Pakistan's relations with Russia, on the other hand, have been more circumspect, shifting upon collision of national interests. Russia has raised concerns about feasible connections between dissident organizations in its own Caucasus area, especially in Chechnya, and terrorist Islamic groups in Pakistan.<sup>64</sup>

### **Terrorism and Counterterrorism: Nuclear Risk in South Asia**

In the post 9/11 period, Pakistan's nuclear program also came under heightened international scrutiny.<sup>65</sup> Concerns grew that terrorist organizations might target Pakistan's nuclear facilities or obtain nuclear materials for illicit purposes.<sup>66</sup> Pakistan responded by assuring the international community that its nuclear facilities were secure and reaffirming its commitment to safeguarding its nuclear assets.<sup>67</sup> Despite several promises, mistrust persisted regarding nuclear proliferation when it was discovered in 2003 that Pakistan's leading nuclear scientist, Dr. Abdul Qadeer Khan (1936-2021), involved in nuclear materials and technology

to Iran, Libya, and North Korea.<sup>68</sup> The Pakistani government refuted any official involvement in the transfer of nuclear data. About nuclear weapons and materials, Pakistan's leadership reaffirmed its commitment to non-proliferation and emphasized its adherence to international standards.<sup>69</sup>

These events accentuate how complicated Pakistan's position in the world is, especially in light of its nuclear weapons and its showcase in the Muslim world.<sup>70</sup> Although Pakistan has developed diplomatic ties with Muslim nations and worldwide peace initiatives, its nuclear program and the proliferation crisis have made it challenging to manage its reputation abroad due to instability at home.<sup>71</sup> The nation's status as a nuclear-armed state continues to cause friction in its interactions with the international community as well as its neighbors.<sup>72</sup>

Pakistan acquired an indispensable, substantial position after the terrorist incident, shattering the West's deep slumber.<sup>73</sup> When the United States launched the War on Terror, it pressured Pakistan to assist in breaking up terrorist networks that operated vigorously within its boundaries.<sup>74</sup> Pakistan sided with the United States in retaliation, offering military installations, intelligence support, and logistical backup for operations in Afghanistan.<sup>75</sup> Deep mistrust, however, marked this uneasy partnership, as Western powers worried that elements within Pakistan's security agencies were collaborating with networks opposed to U.S. objectives.<sup>76</sup> The developed nations raised the problem of terrorist infiltration in Pakistan, ultimately concerning the safety of nuclear arsenals.<sup>77</sup>

Following 9/11, Pakistan's nuclear predicament worsened as the United States and its allies demanded guarantees that Islamabad's nuclear weapons were safe.<sup>78</sup> Concerns that Pakistani nuclear technology might end up in the wrong hands culminated after the A.Q. Khan network's nuclear proliferation efforts were exposed.<sup>79</sup> Under pressure from the United States, Pakistan strengthened security measures, such as better personnel screening and stricter supervision over nuclear installations. It created the National Command Authority (NCA) to manage its nuclear program.<sup>80</sup> Given Pakistan's history of political unrest and the ongoing involvement of terrorist organizations within its borders, Western intelligence services remained skeptical despite the aforementioned measures.<sup>81</sup> The ongoing Pak-India conflict further complicated the issue of nuclear security. Tensions between the two nuclear-armed neighbors intensified in the post 9/11 era.<sup>82</sup> South Asia is one of the world's most dangerous flashpoints because of the presence of nuclear-armed countries that perpetually remain at the threshold of nuclear conflict.<sup>83</sup> Consequently, the United States and its allies continued to keep an eye on Pakistan's nuclear security while working behind the scenes to stop military escalation.<sup>84</sup>

The relationship remained tense even after Pakistan attempted to reassure the West.<sup>85</sup> Because it cast doubts on Pakistan's commitment to counterterrorism, the 'Operation Neptune Spear' in 2011 that killed Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad deep inside Pakistani territory, further damaged trust.<sup>86</sup> The United States cut military funding to Pakistan in the next few years, citing worries about how it handled

nuclear security and terrorism.<sup>87</sup> Nonetheless, as a nuclear state and a vital contributor to regional stability, Pakistan continued to hold strategic significance for the West.<sup>88</sup> Therefore, in the post 9/11 period, Pakistan had to strike a careful balance in an increasingly complicated global environment between Western pressure, domestic security issues and its own strategic goal.<sup>89</sup>

### **Pakistan's Jihadist Proxies and Domestic Insurgency**

Through diplomatic, commercial, and cultural interactions, Pakistan has maintained close connections with the Muslim world, especially with those in the Gulf region. Friendly mutual ties with Islamic countries since inception have been an unflinching pillar of Pakistan's policy. Not merely broaching a two-state solution and support for the Palestinian cause, but addressing prevailing Islamophobia in the West. However, Pakistan's request for the recognition of Israel was ultimately shelved due to strong local resistance, despite efforts to promote peace and collaboration. This reflects the way Pakistan, especially in its relations with the broader Muslim world, must constantly balance domestic sensitivities with its external strategic objectives.

On the other hand, unquestionably, Pakistan's sponsorship of Islamist organizations during the 1980s Afghan-Soviet War is the root cause of its internal militancy and radicalization of society. At the time, Pakistan and its foreign allies, particularly the United States, viewed insurgent organizations like the Taliban as liberators, inviting them to the White House, who urgently required support and funding. However, most of the similar organizations turned their backs on the Pakistani government after 9/11, which was a watershed moment. Domestic militancy emerged because of what had previously been a tactic to maintain regional influence, turning into a cause of internal instability.<sup>90</sup>

The *Tehrik-i-Taliban* Pakistan (TTP), al-Qaeda, and Taliban remnants in Pakistan's tribal areas worsened the situation. These areas developed as havens for insurgents escaping Afghanistan, posing serious problems for internal peace and societal harmony. The radicalization of Pakistan's indigenous populace coincided with the infiltration of foreign terrorist elements, especially in areas where extremist beliefs gained traction. The whole social fabric of Pakistan was disturbed by the religious radicalization that augmented the surge in terrorist attacks, targeting not just security personnel but also civilians, educational institutions, and houses of worship.<sup>91</sup> As on several occasions, Imran Khan (Former Prime Minister of Pakistan 2018-2022) said that 'over 70,000 Pakistanis have lost their lives in this conflict that was not ours. We are held accountable for Afghanistan's shortcomings even though it has destabilized the nation and destroyed our tribal areas.'<sup>92</sup>

## **CONCLUSION**

In essence, Pakistan and the West, navigating terrorism and counterterrorism in the post 9/11 international order, remain focused on realpolitik, prioritizing security, economic needs, and regional ambitions. While collaborating with the US on counterterrorism, Pakistan's relationship with other countries is increasingly

important. This policy balances regional interests with international cooperation. Hassan Askari's analysis of Pakistan's foreign policy in the wake of the 9/11 attacks demonstrates a fulcrum between defending its regional interests, especially in Afghanistan and Kashmir, and cooperating with superpowers like the United States in counterterrorism operations. Conversely, the 9/11 attacks significantly influenced global politics, causing Pakistan to join the Western camp in the War on Terror willingly or unwillingly. This led to internal instability, escalating militancy and strained regional dynamics. Pakistan's strategic policy was permanently impacted, illustrating the challenges of balancing national interests, regional aspirations, and international partnerships.

In the post 9/11 international order, Pakistan's relationship with the West has been marked by cooperation born of necessity and friction rooted in deviating security primacies. Counterterrorism shaped this relationship for two decades, but today it is increasingly influenced by broader structural shifts, regional instability, U.S.-China rivalry, and internal political controls. Expanding the Pakistan-China strategic partnership, military cooperation and China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), it reduced U.S. aid and waned the U.S. influence in Pakistan's internal security policies. The West increasingly viewed Pakistan through the lens of the US-China competition rather than solely through counterterrorism. The transition reduced the Western advantage but also diversified Pakistan's geopolitical position and other options. The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban takeover in 2021 reconfigured regional geopolitics once again. Until now, Pakistan has been facing numerous challenges, such as cross-border instability and TTP insurgences. However, the strained relations with both the Taliban government and the Western states have resulted in a limited engagement, sanctions and security dilemmas, hindering Pakistan's progress and development. Pakistan and the West remained interdependent, despite unbridgeable fissures in their bond. Nevertheless, effective navigation in the relationship in the future will rely on several factors, such as respect for each other's sovereignty, addressing the root causes of militancy, more precise alignment of security objectives, and adapting to a multipolar world where counterterrorism is only one dimension of foreign policy. In short, Pakistan must balance its peace and progress by mitigating terrorism, achieving strategic objectives, and navigating challenges such as political stability and internal militancy.

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