



The U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan and Regional Security Dynamics: Implications for Pakistan and South-Central Asia

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Abstract

Since the Taliban returned to Afghanistan in August 2021 and the United States withdrew from the country, the security situation in the region of South and Central Asia has significantly changed. The political change saw an escalation in terrorism, refugee movements, trans-border crime and drug trafficking, as well as geopolitical rivalries in the region, creating new challenges for neighboring countries. This article discusses the U.S withdrawal's implications for Pakistan, China, Iran and the Central Asian Republics (CARs) with a focus on the region of Pakistan. To gain insight into the impact of Afghanistan's domestic political dynamics on the security situation of its neighboring states. The results indicate that drug trafficking, refugee pressure, and cross-border terrorism has all increased in Pakistan. The possible growth of extremist organizations endangering Xinjiang and the safety of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects have been China's top concerns. The CARs have reinforced their borders in response to security threats from terrorism and regional instability, but Iran has had to address refugee flows, border tensions and a growing threat from the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria-Khorasan (ISIS-K). The study results show that the withdrawal of the U.S. has created a regional security dilemma in Afghanistan, which requires greater cooperation with the neighboring countries. Enhancing counterterrorism cooperation, effective border management and continuing regional dialogue is essential for the promotion of long-term peace and stability in South and Central Asia.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative, Regional Security, Regional Security Complex Theory, South and Central Asia, Security Dynamics, U.S Withdrawal from Afghanistan.



Introduction

In August 2021, the Taliban took control after the U.S withdrew from Afghanistan, which had been under U.S military control for 20 years (Abbasi, 2023; Hussain, M. (2021). This political change had a profound impact on the security and geopolitical environment of South and Central Asian countries (Hasar, 2024; Gul, 2024). The collapse of the former Afghan regime has risen has concerns about uncertainty and concerns regarding the following issues; refugees flow, border security, drug trafficking, and regional stability. Afghanistan's political landscape has evolved, compelling neighboring countries to reassess their security policies and strategies.

The reappearance of the Taliban has had different effects in different parts of the region. The porous border of Pakistan with Afghanistan has resulted in a cross-border terrorism, refugees' influx and drug trafficking (Gul, et al., 2025; Elsayed, 2024). Iran has also seen an increase in refugees, as well as border tensions, water conflicts, and the threat of terrorism from the Islamic State Khorasan (ISIS-K). Extremist groups such as ISIS-K and the Turkestan Islamic Movement or Turkistan Party (ETIM/TIP), which pose a threat to the security of both the region of Xinjiang and Chinese investments in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), have been a source of growing concern for China (Ali, et al., 2024; Bibi & Muzaffar, 2023). Similarly, the Central Asian states have strengthened the security of their borders and cooperation in the region to deal with the danger to terrorism and instability from Afghanistan.

In this article, the developments are analyzed with the help of the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) by Barry Buzan and Ole Waever. The hypothesis suggests that for security reasons, states are not only tightly connected when they are physically close, but also when they have a border. In this way, Afghanistan's political turmoil has affected the security situation in neighboring countries.

This article attempts to study the implications of the U.S withdrawal from Afghanistan on Pakistan, China, Iran and Central Asian Republics (CARs) to gauge the impact on regional security, and how regional countries responded strategically.

Research Objectives

1. To explore the consequences of the U.S. exit from Afghanistan on regional security issues, encompassing matters of terrorism and refugee movements, as well as cross-border issues in Pakistan and neighboring South-Central Asian countries.
2. To assess Pakistan's security policies and the measures taken by other neighboring countries in the region to address the new security challenges and ensure regional security post the U.S. withdrawal.

Research Questions

1. What impact has the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan had on regional security, such as in the areas of terrorism, refugee movements and geopolitical tensions in Pakistan and South-Central Asia?
2. How has Pakistan and its neighbors responded to security issues and how have they tried to foster more cooperation and stability in the region after the U.S. withdrawal??



Literature Review

The US pullout of Afghanistan in August 2021 was a key shift in South and Central Asian security and geopolitics. Through the prism of existing literature, the political turmoil in Afghanistan has historically had regional security implications from its geographical location, lack of robust institutional framework, and history of conflict (Abbasi, 2023; Hussain, M. (2021). According to scholars, the reemergence of the Taliban led to fresh security challenges such as rising fears over terrorism, influx of refugees, border security and geopolitical rivalry among regional powers (Bukhari & Khattak, 2024). The U.S. troops had in fact pulled out of the country after 20 years of outside presence, but left behind a strategic vacuum that had an impact on neighbor states' security calculations.

The Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) created by Buzan and Waever supplies an important theoretical background for the comprehension of Afghanistan's influence on neighbouring states (Gul, et al., 2025; Elsayed, 2024). RSCT states that while security threats can be found in individual states, they also have interconnections in regional settings, where the geographical proximity and political relationship influence security perceptions. That Afghanistan's internal developments have a direct impact on Pakistan, Iran, China, and Central Asian Republics due to shared borders, historical ties and transnational security concerns is the focus of previous studies undertaken from this viewpoint. The theory explains why instability in Afghanistan has led to spill over effects beyond its borders.

The correlation between the political transition in Afghanistan and terror related problems has been studied in many respects. Researchers have noted that the Taliban takeover sparked worries about the revival of militant groups such as Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISIS-K), members of Al-Qaeda and other extremist groups. There is literature which indicates that weak governance structures and security gaps following the withdrawal provided opportunities to reorganise and operate trans-border for extremist groups. The situation is especially precarious in Pakistan because of its long porous border with the adjacent Afghanistan, which has witnessed growing militancy activities that have threatened the national security and regional stability.

Refugee displacement, as a result of the instability in Afghanistan, is another key issue in the studies that already exist on the topic (Bukhari & Khattak, 2024). Historically, Pakistan and Iran have been home to substantial numbers of Afghan refugees, as evidenced by previous studies, which attribute this to geographical proximity and cultural similarity. The political crisis since 2021 worsened the migration situation, putting economic, social and administrative pressure on the host countries. Researchers stress the role that refugees play in shaping employment prospects, social services provision, resource allocation and social cohesion, and call for joint humanitarian and security responses.

Other security issues in Afghanistan that have been mentioned in literature are drug trafficking and transnational crime (Gul, et al., 2025; Elsayed, 2024). Afghanistan's reputation as a leading source of illicit narcotics has impacted neighbouring countries through the trafficking of narcotics, corruption and the existence of criminal organizations and links with extremist groups. Research suggests that the alteration of political realities since the U.S. withdrawal has added to



the border management and counter-narcotics operations.

Furthermore, scholars have explored the broader geopolitical implications of Afghanistan's transition. China has voiced concerns about the threat of extremism in the region of Xinjiang and the security of investment under Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) while Iran has been grappling with refugee situation, border issues, water controversy and ISIS-K operations (Abbasi, 2023; Hussain, M. (2021). Likewise, the Central Asian countries have taken measures to enhance their border security because of the fear of terrorist attacks and instability in the region. In summary, the literature thus far shows an interwoven security dilemma in the South and Central Asia as a result of Afghanistan's political transition. But more studies are needed to fully explore how these factors interact beyond the scope of this report, following the U.S. pullout during times of regional policy responses and humanitarian crises, and the impact of terrorism.

Analytical Framework

Barry Buzan's and Ole Waever's Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) is an appropriate framework to analyze the implications of Afghanistan's political transition for regional security. The theory holds the governments that are geographically near each other are most strongly security interdependent because threats are likely to be transnational via social, political, military and economic channels. According to this viewpoint, changes in Afghanistan cannot be comprehended in a vacuum since they have an immediate impact on the security landscape of surrounding states. This regional interdependency is reflected in the security scenario of the post 2021 period, where conflicts, terrorism, refugees movements, drug trafficking and increased geopolitical competition are challenges that Pakistan, Iran, China and the CAR countries are facing. Therefore, RSCT provides a useful analytical tool to explain the changes in the security environment in south and central Asian as a result of Afghanistan's internal affairs (Bukhari & Khattak, 2024).

Research Methodology

Present Study used qualitative research method for the comprehensive implications of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan on regional security dynamics, particularly for Pakistan and the South-Central Asian region. Qualitative method is an appropriate for this study to analyze the complex geopolitical developments, security challenges, diplomatic relations, and strategic policy. Study critically examined the research and report perspectives, policies and regional interactions through documents analysis, data was collected through convenience sampling technique in order to develop the comprehensive understanding about the study on security environment, cross-border terrorism, refugee movements, regional power competition, and emerging geopolitical realignments following the U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan. Data was collected through the systematic review and critical analysis of reports, research papers such as United Nations, World Bank, and regional security organizations publications, peer-reviewed journal articles, books, newspapers, and strategic policies.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed through documents analysis, reports, and research papers, codes and themes were developed in order to analyze the study about geopolitical trends, and policy implications associated



with the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. It was interpreted comprehensive through feasible evidence of the literature in order to develop the meaningful context and information for the researchers and institutions

Findings of the Study

Regional Security Dynamics Following Afghanistan's Political Transition

The security landscape in South and Central Asia has been profoundly altered by the political change in Afghanistan. A new political order has changed regional strategic calculations, forcing surrounding governments to reevaluate their foreign policy and security priorities. These developments have created humanitarian issues that have an impact on regional stability, increased transnational security concerns, and amplified geopolitical competition. The discussion below focuses on the security dynamics of the region.

Regional Power Competition

The end of almost 20 years of Western military presence in Afghanistan was accompanied by the hasty and uncoordinated withdrawal of U.S. and NATO troops, which has left a power vacuum the Taliban have rapidly filled (Synovitz, 2021). This change has had a profound impact on South and Central Asian politics, security and economics, and offers regional powers the chance to increase influence. Given its location, which is central in Asia and has been a geopolitical crossroads since the beginning of time, Afghanistan is now again a playing field in the "Great Game," as analysts put it (Synovitz, 2021). The shifting power dynamics have led to the speculation on the possibility of informal alliance between countries like Pakistan, Iran, China and Russia to safeguard their interests and to extend their regional influence. Although these countries seem to be collaborating on some security and economic matters, some experts argue that each country is more concerned about its domestic strategic agenda than the shared agenda for the region (Synovitz, 2021). The post-withdrawal situation has also been a source of concern regarding potential for greater anti-Western sentiments and re-emergence of extremist networks; this is a complicated mix of domestic Afghan politics and the wider regional security concerns (Synovitz, 2021). A grasp of their interconnections and interactions is critical to developing effective regional policy responses.

Refugees and Humanitarian Crisis

Displacement due to conflict is one of the main reasons behind the fact that millions of people are on the move and forced to take shelter in neighbouring countries. Refugees that flee violence and war often come to host countries with little physical and mental strength, leaving behind their livelihoods and communities (Brenner & Wallin, 2021). Most of the displaced communities are able to find refuge in nearby countries, putting great strains on host countries, which must host large numbers of migrants and face the social, economic and political implications (United Nations, 2020). Afghanistan is a case in point of one of the longest and most critical displacements. With over 40 years of armed conflict and political instability, nearly a third of the National population, including women and children, require humanitarian assistance and protection (UNHCR, 2023).



The exodus of Afghan citizens has picked up the pace since the Taliban's return to power in Kabul in August 2021. In the immediate aftermath of the U.S. withdrawal, nearly 1.6 million people fled the country, and 8.2 million Afghans are now living in neighbouring countries as the world's largest protected refugee population (Brenner & Wallin, 2021). Persistent instability, natural disasters, systemic poverty, and irregular food supply are among the factors exacerbating the displacement, which was further heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic and the recent political transition (UNHCR, 2023). Even before the Taliban took over, Afghanistan had a high rate of insecurity and violence, leading to the escalation of violence and the displacement of Afghanistan's citizens (Carney, 2022).

The displacement of Afghans has been extensive, with the country having the third largest displaced population in the world, after Syria and Ukraine (UNHCR, 2023). Today, Afghan refugees can be found in 103 countries, while most continue to live in the neighbouring countries where they have traditionally been living for decades, specifically Pakistan and Iran. In particular, over 70% of people seeking support are women and children, underscoring the vulnerability of women and children to situations of displacement (Brenner & Wallin, 2021). Proximity, familiarity of the culture and logistical feasibility contribute to the preference for regional asylum as opposed to movement towards the west. Historically, Pakistan, in particular, has hosted the highest number of Afghan refugees, owing to its 1,640-mile-long border with Afghanistan, without having signed the 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol (UNHCR, 2023).

Afghan displacement has long-term consequences for the refugees and the countries where they have gone. For host states, issues include the allocation of resources, social integration, border management and security, and for refugees, access to basic services, employment, and education (Carney, 2022; Brenner & Wallin, 2021). This is an example of the need for regional and international coordination in terms of more humanitarian support, protection measures and joint security operations to address the multifaceted nature of Afghan displacement. Finally, grasping the magnitude and impact of Afghan migration is essential to help shape policy decisions that will help stabilize refugees and host communities in South-Central Asia.

Terrorism and Cross-Border Security

The Taliban's quick return to power in Afghanistan has sent a clear message to the neighbors that their security is once again in jeopardy. The Afghan Taliban have been fighting foreign and American forces for more than 20 years, but they now need to change from a small group of rebels to an organization that controls the entire state. There are concerns that the threat posed by terrorists from Afghanistan may increase. Due to the Taliban's extreme fictionalization, power battles inside the group are expected to worsen, and the various Taliban factions may collaborate with terrorist groups operating out of Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda and its regional operatives, the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a number of Central Asian jihadists, and anti-Chinese jihadists like the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) are among the organizations supported by the Taliban. Al-Qaeda is one of the several organizations with a sizable foreign fighter force (Bobkin, 2022).



Narcotics Trafficking

Drug trafficking has continued to be one of the biggest transnational security issues faced by Afghanistan's neighbor states. Afghanistan remained a significant source of illegal heroin and, increasingly, methamphetamine headed for regional and global markets despite shifts in trafficking patterns. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reports that methamphetamine trafficking increased and heroin trafficking continued after August 2021, showing the quick growth of networks for the production and distribution of synthetic drugs. The report also notes a change in the trafficking pathways, with more heroin moving southward via the coasts of Pakistan and western India, while Iran remained a key transit hub for heroin and methamphetamine headed for foreign markets. These trafficking networks pose major security risks to adjacent states and the larger region by undermining border security, encouraging organized crime, fostering corruption, and providing financial resources that can support criminal extremist organizations (Report UNODC, 2023)

The Spillover Effects of Afghanistan's Transition on Pakistan

Pakistan has been the most immediately influenced by the political and security events following the U.S. withdrawal. Pakistan sharing a 1640-miles border with Afghanistan, Pakistan occupies a critical position in the regional security complex, making it particularly exposed to the spillover effects of instability over the border. The shifting security situation has spawned a range of interconnected concerns, including the revival of cross-border terrorism, refugee pressures, and narcotics trafficking. These trends have not only affected Pakistan's internal security but have also altered the broader security dynamics of South and Central Asia. The discussion below is about the main ramifications for Pakistan.

Cross-Border Terrorism

Pakistan's western frontier with Afghanistan raises security issues. It has been impacted by the ongoing unrest in Afghanistan, particularly the presence of radical ideological organizations that encourage terrorism. The porous border makes it easier for weapons, smugglers, and militants to travel across borders. Pakistan's stability is impacted when militancy and insurgency spread to Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK). It is therefore vulnerable to security risks because of the close proximity of conflict areas and the ease of infiltration. Baluchistan and KPK have seen a large influx of Afghan refugees as a result of the violence in Afghanistan. This puts a burden on local resources, upsets the social fabric, and creates security issues. Baluchistan and KPK thus turns into a stage for proxy wars, which affects regional stability. Pakistan's security has been hampered by the passage of militants, weapons, and drugs along the Durand Line due to the country's porous border and long-standing ethnic and tribal ties. Pakistan has been viewing Afghanistan as its greatest security danger as a result of the frequent violent outbursts (Bashir, 2023).

The year 2022 was the start of a new wave of militant violence in Pakistan. Terrorist assaults rose by 28% in comparison to 2021, according to the Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (PICSS) 376 attacks by militants resulted in 832 wounded and 533 deaths. For the first time since 2017, Pakistan saw more than 300 militant strikes in a single year, and for the first



time since 2018, there were more over 500 fatalities. This was the greatest yearly number of terrorist attacks in five years. The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) claimed most of the attacks, indicating the revival of militant violence after the Taliban regained control of Afghanistan (Xinhua, 2023).

According to a statistical analysis published by the independent think tank Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (PICSS), terror occurrences in Pakistan have steadily and alarmingly increased in the first half of 2023. According to the report, 271 militant incidents took place during this time, leaving 389 people dead and 656 injured. In contrast, there were 151 attacks over the same period in 2022, resulting in 293 fatalities and 487 injuries. When compared to the same period last year, these numbers show a startling 79% increase in militant attacks during the first half of this year (PICSS, 2023).

There were 521 terrorist attacks in Pakistan in 2024, a 70% increase from the year before. 852 people died as a result of this escalated wave of terrorism, a 23% increase over the number of terrorism-related deaths reported the previous year. These attacks resulted in an additional 1,092 injuries throughout the course of the year. In 2024, there were terrorist attacks in all four provinces as well as the federal capital, but KPK and Balochistan accounted for more than 95% of them (PIPS, 2025). In 2025, there were 699 terrorist incidents nationwide in Pakistan, a 34% increase over the previous year. This was a dramatic spike in militant activity. At least 1,034 people died in this new wave of violence, representing a 21% increase in terrorism-related deaths. Furthermore, 1,366 individuals were hurt during the year, highlighting the rising human cost of terrorism (PIPS, 2026).

Refugee Pressure

Conflict is one of the primary reasons of the millions of people who have been displaced worldwide. Refugees leave their resources behind and arrive in host states in a precarious mental state because of violence and war. Most refugees migrate to the nearest states in search of safety. As a result, there are difficulties for the refugees and consequences for the host states, which must compromise by taking in a sizable number of migrants (Jaffar, 2024). Millions of Afghans have been driven to seek safety in Pakistan due to decades of fighting in Afghanistan. Prior to 2021, Islamabad estimated that there were 1.5 million registered Afghans residing in Pakistan. After the Taliban took control of Kabul in August 2021, about 500,000 more people left the country to seek safety in Pakistan (Khattak, 2026).

Here are some implications on Pakistani society which faces by Afghan refugees.

Economic Impact

The Afghan refugees' entry into Pakistan has put a strain on the resources and here competition occurs in land, water, food and housing. This competition for resources has brought tensions to provinces such as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) and Balochistan, where there are many refugees (Anwar et al., 2021). Refugees' increasing demands for education, energy, transport and jobs have over the decades led to increased tensions between the local population and new arrivals. KPK and Balochistan are traditionally poor provinces and the refugees have made it difficult for



the locals to accomplish their economic goals. Due to the growing demand for resources, limited local capacities have led to socio-economic inequalities especially to those with monthly earnings and subsistence level income (Anwar et al., 2021).

There has also been an affect on labor market dynamics. Afghan refugees, who are typically prepared to work for less, have affected local job trends and put pressure on local workers, which has led to resentment. Refugees' availability of labour can drive down wages for local labourers, especially in the informal sector (Anwar et al., 2021). Refugee presence also has exerted inflationary pressures: refugee demand for commodities and services puts upward pressure on prices, which disproportionately impacts local residents. Some sectors see an economic boost from more business, but most of the people suffer from greater economic pressures. Moreover, a considerable share of the Afghan entrepreneurs reportedly operate in more than one city without tax compliance, which amounts to a significant loss of revenue for the government and also makes it difficult for revenue collection and provision of public services to the people in the city.

Social impacts of Afghan refugees

The social impacts of refugee arrivals are multifaceted, impacting on interpersonal relations as well as community dynamics. Those migrants who are similar linguistically, culturally or ethnically to the local population may be supported and accepted, easing the transition process. For example, the shared cultural identity in host communities can result in sharing resources and being hospitable to each other and have an understanding of each other as seen in historical migrations elsewhere (Anwar et al., 2021). But, in Balochistan, many locals are seeing Afghan migration as a threat to demographic balance. The issue of refugee citizenship has led to worries about the loss of majority status and influence in the long run due to the issuance of CNICs to refugees (Anwar et al., 2021). This perception can help to create ethnic tension and threaten social cohesion in already fragile areas.

The presence of Afghan refugees has also been linked to a rise in social issues such as increased crime, drug trafficking, child labour and exploitation. Many Afghan children are involved in child labour, many of them work in hotels, car washing services, boot polishing and other informal sectors for very long hours in poor conditions (Anwar et al., 2021). Such situations restrict children's access to education and keep them vulnerable to exploitation and criminal networks. Furthermore, there has been a reported case of extremist groups in the area recruiting and/or exploiting vulnerable Afghan youth for terrorism-related activities, such as carrying out or facilitating suicide attacks. This has increased security concerns for the communities living in the region and continued to strain social cohesion and trust between refugees and host communities.

Illegal weapons proliferation and the use of practices in conflict situations have also exacerbated interethnic and tribal conflicts. In the Afghan War period, some refugee groups imported illegal weapons in Pakistan due to getting exposure to Kalashnikov culture and other arms proliferation practices during the war which resulted in increasing the crime rate in Pakistan and further fueling the existing conflicts (Anwar et al., 2021). Thus, there is a multiplier effect on the host communities due to the combination of economic deprivation, lack of resources and social unrest, and refugees and host communities are mutually vulnerable. The refugee influx has



therefore not only put a strain on economic and infrastructural systems, but also on social hierarchies, trust networks, and community cohesion.

Economic and Social Impacts

Economic and social impacts go hand in hand and this plays a continuous cycle of tensions and marginalization. Economic pressures as a result of additional demand for resources and competition for labor leads to resentment and aggravates social tensions and intergroup conflicts. Increased commodity prices, underemployment, and the displacement of labour can lead to community-level grievances, which can lead to both social exclusion and conflict (Anwar et al., 2021). At the same time, social issues like crime, child labor and demographic fears hinder the formation of trust and collaboration for stable economic and social development.

Such interaction proves that Afghan refugees in Pakistan cannot be viewed exclusively as economic or social phenomenon, but it is a socio-economic challenge where coordinated policy responses are needed. Access to jobs and infrastructure can improve livelihoods and reduce tensions, social integration efforts can improve communal resilience and reduce tensions, if they are equitable. Ongoing pressure on local populations without systematic action can lead to increased poverty in refugee and host communities, fragile governance and human rights violations.

Political Impacts

One of the most important impacts of refugee inflows is political and security implications, especially in the host country like Pakistan. Refugees can pose significant security threats, particularly if they continue to be loyal to the country from which they came (Anwar et al., 2021; Jalalzai, 2020). In the Afghan war against the U.S. many Afghan refugees have been involved in anti-state actions in Pakistan and sometimes directly supported the Taliban groups. This engagement also fueled internal turmoil in Pakistan and helped stir up regional chaos with acts of violence, chaos, and terrorism. The host country often suffers from these destabilizing forces, such as higher rates of crime, insurgent activities, and governance problems (Shah & Khan, 2019).

The ongoing conflict in Afghanistan resulted in significant IDP movement in Pakistan, and the provinces of Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), and the former tribal areas were found to have the highest IDP populations (Anwar et al., 2021). The displacement was exacerbated by the attacks on critical infrastructure, such as schools, hospitals and administration buildings, that compelled civilians to flee their homes for safety (Khan & Iqbal, 2020). These forced migrations severely strained local resources, social services and security systems and have led to tensions between host communities and refugee populations.

In addition, refugees' socio-political involvement in host countries may overlap with cross-border political agendas, increasing the likelihood of insurgency and spillover of conflict (Jalalzai, 2020). The experience of Afghan refugees in Pakistan during the Soviet-Afghan war and the U.S. intervention demonstrates how refugee movements can be drivers of regional insecurity. Therefore, the political and security dimensions of refugee crises highlight a need for a holistic



policy framework that integrates humanitarian support with strategic security management to reduce the risks faced by host countries (Shah & Khan, 2019).

Environment Impacts

A massive influx of Afghan refugees in Pakistan has posed a great public health and environmental problem. The re-emergence and spread of poliomyelitis has been one of the most urgent health issues. Polio has been able to spread from border areas to other provinces, especially Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) as millions of refugees regularly cross borders and cannot be vaccinated (Anwar et al., 2021). Polio continues to cross borders and polio spread is seen the most in border districts. This public health problem highlights the urgent need for sustainable vaccination and health care planning in refugee host countries.

The migration has not only brought health challenges but has also put significant strain on natural resources and environmental sustainability. Inadequate access to resources, such as food, water, fuel, land and shelter, is often a problem among refugee populations, having a detrimental impact on long-term resource regeneration. Of particular concern is the deforestation and degradation of the soil which occurs as wood is extensively used for construction of shelter and preparation of food and clearing forests and overgrazing of land by brought in refugee families has affected soil erosion and soil fertility (Anwar et al., 2021). Also, the waste of human excreta has caused contamination of groundwater resources, which has enhanced the risk of water-borne diseases.

Over three million migrants in Pakistan also have added pressure on the country's infrastructure and ecosystems. The camps, dating back almost three decades, are now semi-permanent settlements, exerting pressure on nearby forests and water sources. The degradation and overutilisation of vegetation by livestock grazing and foraging close to camps have worsened the situation, with the collection of fuelwood decreasing soil cover and limiting ground water recharge, thus increasing environmental vulnerability (Anwar et al., 2021). The conditions demonstrate the multifaceted nature of human migration, public health and ecological sustainability, and suggest that any responses to the challenges of Afghan refugee movements must be through a policy lens that considers both health and environmental resilience.

To conclude, Afghan migration has been multifaceted with many implications for Pakistan including increase in spread of diseases like polio and significant environmental degradation. Coordinated health interventions, sustainable resource management and long-term strategies to mitigate ecological harm and support vulnerable refugee populations are needed to address these challenges (Anwar et al., 2021).

a. Narcotics Trafficking

Geopolitical factors and structural geographic realities play a major role in determining Pakistan's place in the global drug trade. The border between Afghanistan and Pakistan continues to be one of the world's most active trafficking routes, facilitating the movement of drugs through unofficial trade networks and isolated mountainous areas that are challenging for law enforcement to adequately monitor. Drug trafficking is also effect on national security in



Pakistan is the connection between narco-terrorism. Narcotics incomes have historically aided militant and insurgent groups by providing funds for recruitment, training, and weapon purchases. Counterterrorism measures are made more difficult by the convergence of criminal and militant networks, which also feeds the cycle of violence and illegal economic activity. Drug trafficking has detrimental effects on human security and society. Long-term societal instability is exacerbated by rising addiction rates, young involvement in criminal networks, and local violence, especially in underprivileged communities with limited access to jobs and education (Khurram, 2026).

The production of poppies, the raw material needed to make heroin and opium, was suddenly outlawed by the new Afghan government. Afghan output plummeted as a result of the decision. In a few of years, the province of Balochistan in Pakistan became one of the new hubs of illicit poppy planting in the region as cultivation swiftly spread across the border (Wahlah & de Gaulle, 2026). It is obvious to farmers that no crop can match opium's profits. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that many southern farmers migrated to Pakistan when the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan outlawed the production of opium poppies in April 2022. Afghan farmers also relocated to Pakistani Balochistan 25 years ago after the Emirate outlawed poppy cultivation in 2000. Drug misuse continues to be a major health issue in Pakistan, having a significant impact on communities and families. Both the use of synthetic medications and narcotics like heroin and opium has significantly increased over time. 6.7 million people, or 6% of the population, use illegal narcotics, including prescribed medications (Sajid et al., 2024).

Implications on China and it's Regional Interests

Despite being fewer than 50 miles long, China's border with Afghanistan is strategically significant. Beijing has long been strategically significant, because it believes Uighur secessionists could utilize the Wakhan corridor to launch attacks in Xinjiang, Beijing has long desired control of the region. Meanwhile, the nearby \$60 billion China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) Initiative is in danger due to insecurity in Afghanistan. Beijing is also concerned about the potential impact of the Taliban's triumph on the emergence of extremist Islamist organizations in Pakistan (Miller et al., 2021).

China's security landscape was drastically changed by the U.S withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 and the Taliban's subsequent comeback. Beijing's main concern has not been refugee arrivals, but rather the potential for Afghanistan to once more act as a haven for terrorist and militant groups that pose a threat to China's regional interests and national security. Beijing is still worried about the persistence of extremist organizations; especially the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISIS-K) and the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), also known as the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), despite the Taliban's efforts to assure China that Afghan territory won't be used against other states (Zhou et al. (2022).

The Taliban government continues to support militant extremist groups that Beijing views as direct threats to its interests abroad and domestic security, China finds it extremely difficult to engage with the government. There are still worries that Afghanistan could be used as a base for training, recruitment, operational planning, and the spread of extremist propaganda, even though



UN assessments show that ETIM/TIP has only a small presence in Afghanistan and that the Taliban has moved many of its members away from the Chinese border in Badakhshan Province. Such actions could jeopardize Chinese investments and BRI projects throughout Pakistan and Central Asia, as well as endanger China's stability, especially in Xinjiang (Zhou et al. (2022).

Furthermore, Chinese security concerns go beyond the possibility of direct cross-border infiltration, even with the geographical protection provided by the isolated and strongly guarded Wakhan Corridor. Beijing is especially concerned about the potential for militant groups based in Afghanistan to spread throughout Central and South Asia, where China has made significant economic investments and an increasing number of its citizens are employed in infrastructure and development projects. As a result, since the U.S withdrew from Afghanistan, China's engagement with the Taliban has focused heavily on counterterrorism cooperation (Zhou et al. (2022).

Iran's Border, Water, and Security Challenges

Afghanistan and Iran have a 921-kilometer border; therefore changes in Afghanistan directly affect Iran's foreign policy, border control, and national security. Tehran was forced to reevaluate its strategy for border security, refugee management, cross-border trade, water-sharing, and engagement with the de facto Taliban administration after the Taliban's return to power in August 2021 drastically changed the security dynamics along Iran's eastern border.

The Helmand River, which crosses the border and is about 1,000 kilometers (621 miles) long, is being dammed on the Afghan side in order to irrigate agricultural land and produce electricity. According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), drought has been an issue in Iran for around 30 years and has gotten worse over the last ten years. According to the Iran Meteorological Organization, 97% of the nation is currently experiencing some form of drought. Afghanistan and Iran signed the Helmand Water Treaty fifty years ago, which stipulates that Afghanistan must give Iran 850 million cubic meters of water from Helmand each year (Al Jazeera, 2023). The leadership of the Taliban is motivated by religious ideology, in contrast to traditional political regimes. Mullahs, or religious clerics, make up a large portion of its membership and think that Sharia law is the answer to every problem. Diplomatic attempts to settle water issues are hampered by this attitude as well as a disdain for international standards. Afghanistan's Ministry of Energy and Water is led by Abdul Latif Mansour, a former jihadi commander who is currently subject to UN sanctions, demonstrating the regime's unconventional style of governing (Mahaqi, 2025).

After the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, again a large number of Afghans fled to Iran as the security and humanitarian situation in Afghanistan deteriorated. A local Iranian border guard at the border crossing in Zaranj in October 2021 reportedly stated that 3000 to 4000 individuals were trying to enter Iran per day while before the takeover it had been 1000 to 2000 individuals. Only those with valid visa (500 to 600 individuals per day) were allowed to cross the border (European Union Agency for Asylum [EUAA], 2022).

The security landscape in the region was drastically also changed. The fall of the previous Afghan government and the withdrawal of U.S. and coalition forces created circumstances that



allowed ISIS-K to adapt, rebuild networks, and maintain its operational capabilities, even though the Taliban views ISIS-K (Islamic State Khorasan Province) as a major rival and has carried out operations against the group. The risk of transnational terrorist action, including against Iran, a neighbor, rose due to this changing security environment. ISIS-K has frequently attacked Iranian interests as an ideological rival of the Taliban and an avowed hater of Shia Muslims. This culminated in the January 2024 Kerman bombings, which showed the group's ability to export violence outside of Afghanistan. Therefore, even if ISIS-K was not created by the Taliban takeover, it did contribute to a regional climate where the group remained resilient and constituted a mounting threat to Iran's security.

Security Dynamics between Afghanistan and Central Asian States

Three Central Asian countries Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan are vulnerable to security threats as a result of the country's post-Taliban rule because of their close borders with Afghanistan. Every state has taken a different method to combating the Taliban. Tajikistan has been vocal in its opposition to the Taliban while avoiding political engagement. Tajikistan has adopted a tough stance because of its historical ties to the Taliban, its ethno-cultural ties to Ethnic Tajiks in Afghanistan, and the Taliban government's targeting of it. Tajikistan has been concerned about the presence of terrorist groups in Badakhshan, in northern Afghanistan. Tajikistan's main concerns are Islamic State- Khorasan (ISIS-K) and Jamaat Ansarullah. The latter worked out of Afghanistan with the intention of overthrowing the Tajik government and establishing an Islamic emirate (Gupta, 2024). When a string of violent cross-border incidents highlighted the vulnerability of the Afghanistan-Tajikistan border in late 2025, the decline in border security became more apparent. An armed conflict near the border on December 23, 2025, resulted in the deaths of at least five security officers, including two Tajik border guards and three Afghan nationals. The State Committee for National Security of Tajikistan claims that armed attackers attacked from the regions of Takhar and Badakhshan in Afghanistan (Reuters, 2025). There had been other violent episodes earlier in December before the clash. Five Chinese people were reportedly killed and numerous more were injured on December 2, 2025, in Tajikistan's Khatlon Province as a consequence of cross-border strikes coming from Afghan territory (Shaheen, 2025).

A major issue in the development of relations between Turkmenistan and Afghanistan has been the lack of clarity regarding the future course of the situation inside Afghanistan and the potential threats to the national security of neighboring countries. The situation was made worse by the construction of the Qosh Tepa canal on the Amu Darya River. The canal was dangerous for Turkmenistan. The state had a record amount of protests in 2020 as a result of the economic crisis, which was made worse by issues with the food supply. The most severely impacted regions of the state were those that border Afghanistan, Lebap and Mary, both of which are also negatively impacted by the present Afghan government's construction of the Qosh Tepa canal. Farmers in Lebap province were unable to irrigate their cotton fields in June 2023 due to a lack of water. The country may see another round of protests as a result of the deteriorating water situation (Gusseinov, 2024).

The Qosh Tepa Canal is the primary area of contention between Uzbekistan and the Taliban. For



agriculture, Uzbekistan mostly depends on water from the Amu River. The Taliban's stance on this matter has not altered despite multiple conversations with them. Due to intense power conflicts inside the Taliban, it is nearly impossible to undertake talks with them because it is unknown who makes decisions for the regime (Gupta, 2024).

Discussion and Conclusion

Discussion

The security dynamics of South and Central Asia have been drastically altered by the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 and the Taliban's subsequent return. Two decades of direct U.S (Abbasi, 2023; Hussain, M. (2021). military participation came to an end with the departure, but it also brought about a complicated regional security environment marked by heightened geopolitical rivalry, increasing terrorism, refugee migrations, cross-border crime, and drug trafficking (Hasar, 2024; Gul, 2024). The results show that different neighboring states have had different effects from Afghanistan's political transformation. Pakistan's internal security has been severely strained by the rise in cross-border terrorism, refugee pressures, and drug trafficking. Preventing Afghanistan from turning into a haven for extremist organizations that could endanger Xinjiang and Chinese economic interests, especially the Belt and Road Initiative, has been China's top priority (Gul, et al., 2025; Elsayed, 2024). Iran has had to deal with an increased danger from ISIS-K, border disputes, water-sharing issues, and rising refugee arrivals. Concerns about terrorism and instability emanating from Afghanistan have prompted the Central Asian republics to bolster border security and regional cooperation. The article uses the Regional Security Complex Theory to show that security issues influence neighboring states directly and transcend national boundaries, making it impossible to understand Afghanistan's internal processes in isolation (Ali, et al., 2024; Bibi & Muzaffar, 2023). The increasing interdependence of regional security and the necessity of coordinated actions are highlighted by the post-2021 security environment. The article comes to the conclusion that improved cooperation between Afghanistan and its neighbors in areas including counterterrorism, border control, refugee administration, and efforts to combat transnational organized crime is essential to long-term regional stability. Coordinated regional policies that tackle both the current security issues and the underlying political and economic causes of instability are necessary for South and Central Asia to achieve lasting peace.

Conclusion

Study concluded that the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan has significantly transformed the regional security landscape develop a feasible opportunities and challenges for Pakistan and South Asian regions respectively. Withdrawal substituted the strategic balance of power develop the concerns over cross-border terrorism, violent extremism, refugee movements, illicit trafficking, and political instability for Pakistan's national security and peace and South Asian respective regions. Transforming the geopolitical environment reflects the involvement of regional and global powers such as China, Russia, Iran, and the Central Asian states and promotes the regional integrity and collapse. Findings of the study reveal that Pakistan occupies the significant position to sustain its regional stability with diplomacy, borderline engagement,



and counterterrorism cooperation with its neighboring countries. Furthermore, study also focused on the peace and security in South-Central Asia which depends upon the regional cooperation, economic exchange, intelligence sharing, and political integrity among the related stakeholders therefore it strengthening multilateral partnerships, develop the regional and institutional cooperation, Socio cultural development and promote peace policies in South Asia, counter the alarming threats and sustain the long-term regional stability respectively.

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