# ASSESSING SECURITY RISKS FOR PAKISTAN UNDER TALIBAN RULE

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## Abstract

*The return of the Afghan Taliban in 2021 significantly changes the geo-political landscape of the South Asian region. The Taliban's return not only opens new opportunities for the neighbouring countries but also increases the security challenges for the neighbouring countries, especially for Pakistan. The 2025 October skirmishes also highlight the growing trust deficit. This research paper assesses the major security risks for Pakistan under the Afghan Taliban rule.*

*The security risks are traditional and non-traditional threats that create fear between two states. The potential threats include cross-border terrorism and the rise of Tehreek-e-Taliban-e-Pakistan (TTP). The Taliban's return also inspires many local extremist elements, which will destabilise Pakistan internally. At the same time, the Pak-Afghan historical background can't be ignored as it shapes the recent relations. The number of Afghan migrants seeking refuge in Pakistan has significantly increased since the Taliban took power. Pakistan, regardless, creates a mechanism for the return of Afghan migrants but their presence without documentation always poses a threat to the state.*

*The economic sector is also directly affected because smuggling through the border is also taking place. All these threats required extraordinarily quick measures. Pakistan is looking towards the maximisation of security on its western border and to maintain relations as Pakistan's relations with the eastern border are not good, while Islamabad does not want to open a new front from the western side. However, the major threats are coming from the western border, which Pakistan is insecure to handle due to the previous close ties with the Taliban.*

*Keywords: Pakistan, Afghanistan, Regional security, Taliban, Security, TTP*

## Introduction

The takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban in August 2021 has sparked a global conversation on the consequences and repercussions for neighbouring countries. The Taliban takeover of Kabul and the US-led NATO alliance ended the war, but for the neighbouring countries, a new phase of tension began. The trickle-down effect of the Afghan Taliban regime's rule was immediately shown in the bordering state. Although it was a reality that most states were happy about the return of the Afghan Taliban to power, the situation was miscalculated, and the consequences of the Afghan Taliban's return were seen.

Islamabad initially welcomed the return of the Afghan Taliban regime. Following the fall of Kabul, the majority of Pakistanis supported the Afghan Taliban and expected peace to return to the region, but others believe that Kabul's new government is more of a burden than a benefit.

Pakistan and Afghanistan have the longest border, which is over 2,640 kilometres (1,640 miles). Particularly in the tribal area, which has strong ties to Afghan customs and culture, the bordering nations also have similar traditions, cultures and religions. In the past, the border has served as both a major transit route for

people and products moving between the two countries and a flashpoint for violence and hostility.

Pakistan is deeply concerned about its security in light of the Taliban's recent ascent to power. Concerns about growing terrorism, extremism and transnational militant activities have been stoked by the Taliban's return to power. Pakistan had previously dealt with security issues originating in Afghanistan and the Taliban's comeback has made matters worse. Increased security threats could have negative effects on social stability, economic growth and regional peace. The burden on infrastructure and resources makes it harder to monitor and control movement within the nation, which increases security dangers. In order to ensure stability and security, addressing these security concerns calls for an all-encompassing strategy that includes border management as well as effective refugee management techniques and cooperation.

It is also a fact that Pakistan has a geopolitical advantage due to the Afghan Taliban's control over Kabul. A peaceful and stable Afghanistan can pave the way for a new economic corridor that will benefit the countries of South and Central Asia and Pakistan can serve as a link between the group and the outside world. However, the situation does not seem to remain the same as Pakistan's security concerns have been raised and threats are gradually increasing. Not only are indirect attacks taking place from non-state actors, but direct attacks from the Afghan side are also highlighting Pakistan's concerns.

Political change in Afghanistan has always affected the region, especially Pakistan. It has also presented Pakistan with different security risks. The research study is focused on evaluating the consequences for Pakistan that result from the return of the Afghan Taliban regime and how a return of the group led to a rise in security threats. This article also tries to analyse the security risks for Pakistan under Taliban rule. While different scholars have different opinions on the Taliban's return, the majority of scholars believe that the Taliban regime's return in 2021 was seen by extremist groups as a major strength, posing a serious threat to Pakistan.

**Literature review:**

The authors of a research paper titled "Emergence of hell in the West Pakistan-Afghan relations post-9/11 era," Dr Safdar Hussain, Mohammad Isfahan and Dr Imran Ali highlighted that mistrust between Pakistan and Afghanistan is a basic reason for the instability. Since Pakistan's independence from British India, relations between Kabul and Islamabad have deteriorated due to a variety of factors, including insurgency, cross-border attacks, blame gaming, the Durand Line issue, the Pashtoonistan issue, language issues and numerous other misunderstandings. The scholars agree with the researcher; however, Pakistan constantly considers its own interests and ambitions while formulating the Afghan policy, which may be considered contrary to the Afghan mindset.

In a research paper, "Repatriation of Afghan Refugees, Fencing Pak-Afghan Border for National Security of Pakistan," by Imrana Begum, because of the illegal migration of Afghans into Pakistan, criminal activities as well as terrorism increased in Pakistan. The scholar partially agrees with the researcher, as the terrorist activities in Pakistan have increased due to illegal Afghan migrants, but after the nationwide crackdown, the activities still remain because there are several factors contributing to the rise of terrorism.

Former diplomat Maleeha Lodhi in her paper, Afghanistan Peace Process: Missed Opportunities, stated that Islamabad's relations with Kabul would remain insecure and the pain and suffering of the Afghans would worsen if the country's situation remain same. The scholar agrees that Afghanistan's instability poses a greater threat.

Research journal "Fallout of Afghan situation and Pakistan's policy responses," by Ahmed Ali, emphasised Islamabad to work with the Afghan Taliban to strengthen bilateral ties and cooperation in order to counter terrorism, promote economy and create cooperative border security mechanisms after the Taliban regime is formally recognised by the international community. Pakistan's focus is more on terrorist organisations, not the country's people. Pakistan needs to implement a policy of outreach to various Afghan societal groups in order to counter the anti-Pakistan sentiments. Scholar partially agree with the researcher that the Pakistan policies are state centric not the people centric approach towards the Afghan people.

**Methodology:**
This study is qualitative in nature and is based on secondary data which have been analyzed, investigated and critically described. The secondary data includes academic journals, papers, articles, websites and reports related to the study which have been examined and analyzed via thematic means.

**Theoretical Framework:**
In today's world, states seek to maximise power, therefore this study employs structural realism to examine data on security dangers in Pakistan under the Taliban administration. It is now crucial to establish a thorough understanding of the fundamental assumptions of structural realism. Structural realism typically begins with the following assumptions:
• The international system is anarchic; there is no credible power above the states that threaten the system
• States cannot be certain of the intentions of other states
• At least some states have offensive capabilities
• States have preferences that they seek to understand and survival is an essential requirement for realising such a preference.
The following components of structural realism are guided by the established premises. The structural theory comprises offensive and defensive realism. The offensive seeks to maximise power, while the defensive seeks to maximise security. First and foremost, a state requires survival to pursue its preferences in a global context in which a state aspires to survive. States are intensely worried about the balance of power and struggle among themselves to obtain power at the expense of others or, at the very least, to ensure that they do not lose power.

**Historical background of Pak-Taliban ties:**
Pakistan and Afghanistan have a long history of tense relations. Pakistan, as the neighbouring state, sees and formulates Afghan policies from a security perspective, which is a major element of tension. These policies were directly reflected during the 1980s and 1990s events in Afghanistan.
The Saur Revolution in 1978, sponsored by the Soviets, was one of the major events in Afghanistan in which a communist uprising took place, and Islamabad perceived it as a threat. Pakistan was one of the regions that was significantly impacted by the Saur Revolution. Pakistan's infrastructure and resources were being strained socially, economically and politically as a result of the large-scale migration of Afghan refugees into Pakistan. Islamabad was concerned about the communist takeover of Afghanistan because of ideological differences and worries about the Soviets' influence spreading throughout the region. To counter it, Pakistan supported the anti-communist forces, such as Mujahideen. Pakistan, with the help of Western nations, provided support to mujahideen.
Following around ten years of support for the Afghan communist government, the USSR was confronted with mounting challenges as well as pressure. The Soviet Union intervened in Afghanistan in 1979 and ended the occupation in 1989 with the troops' withdrawal. A power vacuum resulted from the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan. The lack of a strong central government resulted in a bloody civil war between various political and ethnic groupings fighting for control.
It is also a fact that after the soviet withdrawal, the West and Pakistan stopped providing support to mujahideen. The civil war was at its peak and with time passed the situation was getting worse. During that time, Pakistan also played some constructed role by holding talks between different parties. However, the talks were never successful and they further led towards chaos.
The cities were under the control of different warlords. There was no central government and Afghanistan was a lawless society. The people of Afghanistan have seen almost all of the leaders' true faces. None of them could honour their commitments.
The Taliban phenomenon began in 1994. It is also a fact that the Taliban were initially the indigenes'

movement which later on got support from Pakistan. The Taliban started killing Afghan criminals, clearing barriers and disarming rebels. The Taliban were presented as the warlord-busting protectors of the defenceless. The Taliban, supported by massive popular backing, began to clean up several areas. Individuals from across Afghanistan started joining them.

There were a few events in which Pakistan saw the Taliban as a potential stabilising force for Afghanistan. In one such event, at least 30 Pakistani trucks carrying goods for central Asian states were kidnapped by the warlord in Kandahar. In roughly two weeks, the Taliban retook the convoy, executed the leaders and paved the road to Central Asia. This event boosted the trust of Pakistan for the Taliban. Later on, the Taliban gradually took control of Afghanistan. By September 1996, the Taliban had taken Kabul, assassinated the country's president Najibullah and established the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

Pakistan-Taliban initial relations were very cardinal. Pakistan was the initial country who accept the Taliban government as the official government of Afghanistan. But sooner Pakistan realized its mistake. When the Taliban announced the destruction of Buddha statues in Bamiyan, Pakistan requested Taliban officials to reverse this decision but they refused which put the ink of the mistrust. Later on, due to the domestic political chances in Pakistan, Islamabad becomes a major part of the war on terror.

As a matter of fact, the United States initially accepted the phenomenon of the Taliban but later on, Osama Bin Laden's Al Qaeda factor and bombings of two US embassies in Kenya (Nairobi) and Tanzania (Dar es Salaam), there was unrest. The US demanded the Taliban to hand over Bin Laden but the Taliban refused. Pakistan also seconded US demand and several times requested but the Taliban also rejected it. 9/11 attacks added fuel to the fire which resulted in the two options given by the US either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists. Pakistan after 9/11 provided support to the US. Pakistan bases were handed to the US. Although there were different opinions that Pakistan played on both sides while providing a safe haven to the Taliban as well as supporting the US.

After Taliban rule, Pakistan's influence was reduced more due to the new Kabul government. The Kabul government was more inclined towards India and New Delhi's influence increased which Pakistan showed its strong displeasure. Pakistan although believed that the Taliban government was not acceptable to the west but for Islamabad it is necessary.

Initially, the US-led NATO alliance was very successful in fighting against the Taliban but later on when the US opened another front in the middle east which was directly effecting on the US forces. For almost decade, the US and its alliances failed to get any prominent military success which led to the other option. The informal talks with the Taliban by the US government were started. That time President Barack Obama also believed that there was no military solution. While the Taliban were ready to hold the talks but they were not ready to engage with the Afghan government as they called them a puppet to the US. Pakistan was being accused of providing safe havens to terrorists by the US and the Abbottabad operation was such an example in which Al-Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden was killed.

While during talks, Pakistan played an important role while providing all support to the US administration. Pakistan facilitated the negotiations while releasing the key Taliban commanders from custody which the Taliban was demanding. It is also a fact that Pakistan wants a Taliban government in Afghanistan as the Ghani government was more of a threat than a benefit due to the Indian factor. Finally, the Doha Agreement was signed on 29 February 2020. On 15 August 2021, the Taliban took control of Afghanistan's capital city of Kabul. On August 30, 2021, US officials declared the end of the military and diplomatic presence in Afghanistan.

**Assessing security risks for Pakistan: Socio-economic and political aspects:**
The Taliban after fighting two decades of war come to power. Some sectors believed that this time Taliban learned from their previous mistakes and they are changing. Meanwhile, the major party which is going to suffer, either positively or negatively, are the neighbouring countries.

Pakistan welcomed the return of the Afghan Taliban to power and believed that India's role would be

removed. Pakistan was looking at this development in terms of power dynamics and maximising its power and influence in the region. Although it is also a fact that the previous Kabul government was not friendly to Pakistan but the new Taliban government was considered as much better.

Similarly, the new security threats increased which is a major challenge for Pakistan. Militant groups such as Tehreek e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and other groups see the Taliban government a strength for them which is a major challenge and hurdle for Pakistan. During the US-Taliban war, the tribal region of Pakistan hosted the majority of the Afghan Taliban leaders and later on TTP formed. It is rare possibility that the Afghan Taliban will take any action against them.

According to the Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) report, a Think Tank based in Islamabad, in 2023, there was a 17% surge in extremist activity in Pakistan. This was the third year in a row that Pakistan saw an increase in militant assaults and the ensuing death toll. The Taliban's back to Kabul in 2021 directly affected the attack statistics in Pakistan.
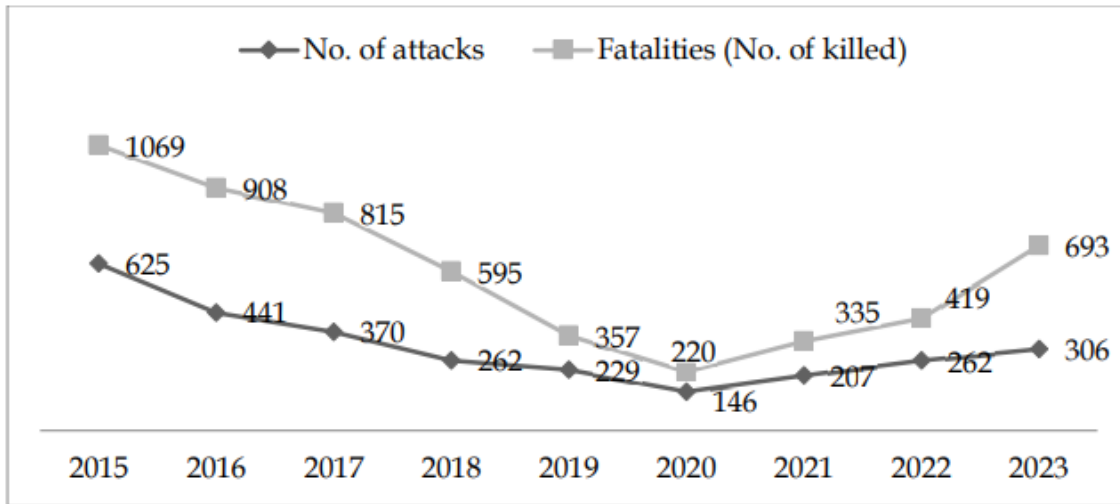
A total of 306 militant attacks took place in Pakistan in 2023, which killed 693 people and injured 1,124 others. According to the PIPS report, "these attacks represented a 17 per cent increase from the previous year and the number of people killed in these attacks also represented a 65 per cent increase from those killed in similar attacks during the previous year."

| Region | No. of Attacks | Killed | Injured |
|---|---|---|---|
| Khyber Pakhtunkhwa | 174 | 422 | 782 |
| Balochistan | 110 | 229 | 282 |
| Punjab | 6 | 16 | 8 |
| Karachi | 14 | 16 | 26 |
| Sindh (excluding Karachi) | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Gilgit-Baltistan | 1 | 10 | 26 |
| **Total** | **306** | **693** | **1,124** |

**Figure 1: Terrorist Attacks in Pakistan in 2023. Source: PIPS**

The report also stated that the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa region has faced the highest number of attacks. PIPS documented 174 incidents of terrorism in the province, resulting in 422 fatalities and 782 injuries. Balochistan was the second province most hit by terrorism in 2023, after Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where 229 people were killed and 282 injured in 110 reported attacks.

Pakistan saw 521 terrorist incidents in 2024, a 70% increase over the previous year. This escalated wave of terrorism killed 852 lives, a 23% increase over the previous year's terrorist-related deaths. Another 1,092 individuals were hurt in the attacks that occurred this year. Although terrorist incidents were reported in all four provinces and the federal capital in 2024, more than 95% of them occurred in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. 621 militants were killed in 2024.
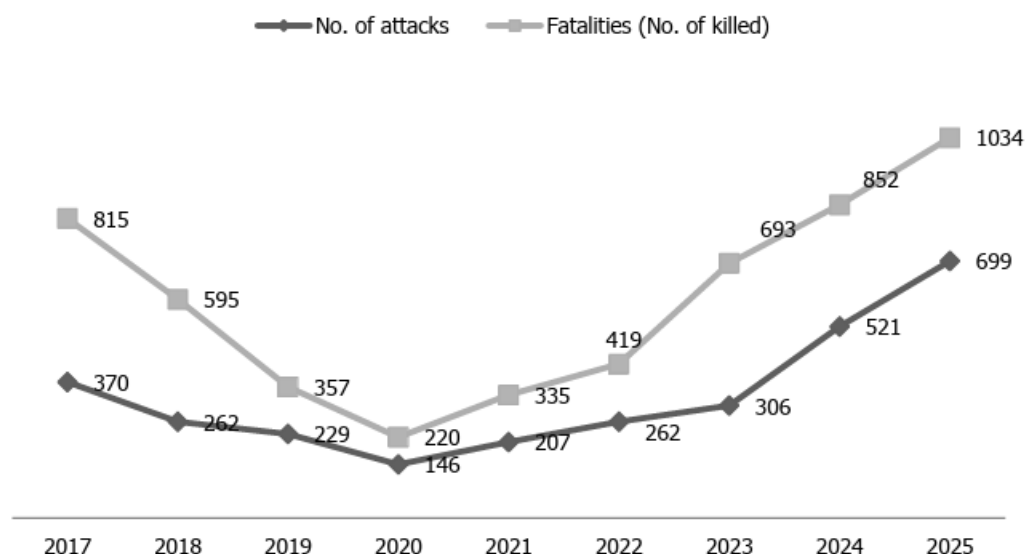
**Figure 2: Comparison of Terrorist Attacks and Fatalities in Pakistan (2015-2023) Source: PIPS**

Three main terrorist organisations, Tehreek-e-Taliban-e-Pakistan (TTP) and its affiliates Tehreek-e-Jihad Pakistan, Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K), and the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) were responsible for more than 82% of the deaths related to terrorism.

| Region | No. of Attacks | Killed | Injured |
|---|---|---|---|
| Khyber Pakhtunkhwa | 413 | 581 | 698 |
| Balochistan | 254 | 419 | 607 |
| Punjab | 7 | 5 | 2 |
| Islamabad | 1 | 12 | 36 |
| Karachi | 16 | 14 | 10 |
| Sindh (excluding Karachi) | 5 | 0 | 7 |
| Gilgit-Baltistan | 3 | 3 | 6 |
| **Total** | **699** | **1,034** | **1,366** |

**Figure 3: Terrorist Attacks in Pakistan in 2025. Source: PIPS**

Meanwhile, in 2025, Pakistan witness 34% increase in terrorist attacks as compared to the previous year. This renewed wave of violence claimed at least 1,034 lives, marking a 21% rise in terrorism-related fatalities, with 1,366 people injured. Of the total terrorism-related fatalities, as many as 437, or more than 42%, were personnel of security and law enforcement agencies, including 174 policemen, 122 army soldiers, 107 FC members (both Frontier Corps and Federal Constabulary), 21 Levies personnel, 12 paramilitary troops, and one Rangers official. Civilians were also heavily affected, with 354 non-combatants losing their lives. Meanwhile, 243 militants were killed.

**Figure 4: Comparison of Terrorist Attacks and Fatalities in Pakistan (2017-2025)**

The above figures and report show that despite Pakistan's positive approach and thought for the return of the Taliban, Islamabad is facing a huge challenge in the security sector. These security threats, which Pakistan was assessing during the previous Kabul regime are now openly coming forward. While it is also a fact that the Indian factor is out of Afghanistan but several new alternative threats emerged.

Not only did security threats increase for Pakistan but the economic sector was also affected after the Taliban came to power. Bloomberg in its report in 2023, stated that around $5 million are being smuggled daily from Pakistan to Afghanistan. Although, Pakistan has taken some serious steps but still smuggling across border is taking place. After the US withdrawal, the Taliban's government financial system was not connected to the international institutions and smuggling also supported kabul's government. While, the economic cooperation and trust can only be possible when Taliban government build its relations with the international community however it is also fact that the black border economy will remain despite many measures because Afghan Taliban will continue face international pressure and for survival they will not take strike measures related to the borders.

While Pakistan will go towards defensive realism, which emphasises the maximisation of security. Pakistan will try to take measures to protect the border, which will directly elevate the border tensions, as we have previously seen that whenever Pakistan decides to build security check posts or any installation, Taliban border officials object and borders are eventually closed. Political instability is also an important element both inside Pakistan and Afghanistan as it will directly create a security risk important.

The clashes on October 11, 2025, at the Pakistan-Afghanistan border are a crucial expression of the two countries' escalating security challenge, which is mostly driven by the unsolved issue of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) sanctuaries in Afghan territory. Pakistan has often claimed that TTP terrorists operate from across the border, launching cross-border assaults on Pakistani security personnel and civilian targets. In response, Afghan Taliban officials have denied assisting while refusing to take direct action against TTP members, citing the problem as an internal Pakistani concern. This disparity in danger perception has exacerbated mistrust, escalating small border incidents into larger diplomatic conflicts.

The October 2025 confrontations demonstrate how non-state actors may intensify interstate tensions, sending bilateral ties into a downward cycle marked by retaliation, border closures, and increased military vigilance.

The October 2025 border clash entrenched the downturn in Pakistan-Afghanistan ties by supporting opposing narratives of sovereignty and counterterrorism duty. For Islamabad, the continuation of TTP strikes demonstrates Kabul's failure to keep Afghan land from being exploited against neighbouring governments. In contrast, the Afghan Taliban view Pakistan's cross-border responses as abuses of territorial sovereignty, casting the war within a nationalist rhetoric. This reciprocal securitisation has hampered diplomatic interaction and diminished the chances for collaborative border control methods.

**Conclusion:**

Pakistan-Afghanistan relations have always been difficult due to the internal conflicts. The return of the Taliban group to Afghanistan also makes some positive moves for Pakistan as previously the Kabul regime was hostile towards Pakistan. Now, the current Taliban regime is closer to Islamabad. Though there have been some hints of their goals and ambitions, the Taliban regime's future path in Afghanistan is still unclear. Consolidating their rule and taking control of the entire nation is one of the Taliban's top goals. However, for Pakistan, there can be economic cooperation with Afghanistan but in the security sector, Pakistan will suffer as the Afghan Taliban will not use force against Tehreek e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and its allies. Although Pakistan and Afghanistan will cooperate against the Islamic State (IS) as both believe it is a common enemy but the TTP factor will always play a hurdle in the relations between both countries.

On the other hand, to meet the problems created by the deteriorating internal security situation, maintain the current zero-tolerance stance toward terrorist groups, with no conversations unless they renounce violence. Increase the ability and involvement of civilian law enforcement authorities, in addressing terrorist threats through community-based structures. Also, launch a broad conversation with local populations and representatives of political and social organisations, particularly in Balochistan and KP, to isolate extremists and build community confidence and support for counterterrorism measures.

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