



The TTP Factor in Pakistan's Post-2021 Afghanistan Policy: Security Dilemma and Cautious Engagement with the Taliban Regime

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Submission: July 03, 2026 Revised: July 28, 2026 Accepted: August 14, 2026 Available Online: August 29, 2026 Keywords: <i>Tehrik-I-Taliban Pakistan; Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations; Taliban Regime; Security Dilemma; Cautious Engagement; Counterterrorism; Post-2021 Afghanistan</i> Corresponding author: Hassan Ali Email: f2024112001@umt.edu.pk	The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 transformed Pakistan's western security environment and reopened critical questions about cross-border militancy, border governance, and Islamabad's long-term Afghanistan policy. While Pakistan initially expected that a Taliban-led government in Kabul would be more responsive to its security concerns, the resurgence of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) soon became a major source of tension between the two sides. This article examines how the TTP has shaped Pakistan's post-2021 Afghanistan policy and why Islamabad has adopted a strategy of cautious engagement rather than full recognition, complete disengagement, or direct confrontation with the Taliban regime. Using the security dilemma as a theoretical framework, the study argues that Pakistan views the TTP's operational space in Afghanistan as a direct threat to its internal security, while the Taliban regime often interprets Pakistani pressure, border controls, and coercive measures as hostile actions against Afghan sovereignty. Based on qualitative analysis of official statements, United Nations reports, security assessments, and scholarly literature, the article finds that the TTP has become the central factor complicating Pakistan-Taliban relations. It concludes that sustainable engagement depends on verifiable counterterrorism cooperation, institutionalized border mechanisms, and a calibrated policy that combines diplomacy, pressure, and regional coordination.

Introduction

The return of the Taliban in Afghanistan has been a pivotal moment in the South Asian politics and security landscape in August 2021. When the Afghan Republic fell and the Taliban came back to power to Pakistan, it seemed like an opportune strategic window. Islamabad has always looked at Afghanistan from the perspective of border security, migration, influence of India and militant sanctuaries. A Taliban-led government would, in some instances, create security peace in Pakistan and enhance Pakistan-Iran coordination, some politicians had anticipated. The revival of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), however, quickly complicated the prospect of it being the strategic opportunity that was hoped for; making Afghanistan back into a security challenge for Pakistan (Zahid, 2022).

The TTP factor is at the forefront of the analysis of deteriorating relations between the Taliban regime and Pakistan following 2021. The TTP is not just a militant group in borderlands of Pakistan, it also is a threat to the state's authority, legitimacy and territory. It has specifically targeted security forces, police, traditional authorities, civilians of the state or state-related organizations, and government-centered institutions and symbols since 2007. It was weakened in the mid-2010s by military operations but ultimately it fragmented and re-united, and enjoyed the altered landscape caused by the Taliban's victory. The post-2021 period thus provided the TTP with new operation and psychological confidence (Sayed & Hamming, 2023).

Pakistan's primary worry is that the Afghan territory could be utilized by the TTP for organizing, training, sheltering and stowing away cross border attacks. Islamabad has repeatedly urged the Taliban to take some concrete and tangible action against anti-Pakistan elements. Taliban cannot accept any claims that they allowed Afghanistan to be used against Pakistan and answer Pakistani's allegations as exaggerated or politically motivated. This paradox has created a significant lack of trust. The Pakistani government sees the Taliban inaction as tolerance, weakness or even an invitation to interfere, while the Taliban see the pressure on Pakistan, closure of its borders, deportations, and reported strikes as interference in the nation's affairs, as a matter of fact, in Afghan sovereignty (United Nations Security Council, 2025).

The security dilemma paradigm is used in this article to understand the Pakistan-Taliban dynamics since 2021. A security dilemma can be caused if an actor's actions, based on their defense, are seen as threatening by the other actor and trigger a response in form of counterdefense. While the concept was developed primarily for use in state relations, it has some value here as the Taliban are essentially the strongmen of Afghanistan but do not have popular endorsement. Pakistan assesses the implementation of border situations, diplomatic pressure, counter terror laws and the calls on the TTP as defensive. However, the Taliban might consider these moves as an act of aggression to weaken the Taliban rule. The dilemma that exists between the intention and perception exists in the middle of the triangle (Jervis, 1978).

The ideological and historical ties between the Afghan Taliban and the TTP add to the dilemma. Both movements have a distinct identity and organization, leadership, and focus of operation. They have religious-ideological commonalities, battlefield experience, and networks established in the context of the Afghan conflict however. It may make the job more difficult for the Taliban to decide on sweeping counter-terrorist measures against the TTP as they may risk splitting ranks or ingratiating themselves with their former partners. But Pakistan cannot accept the apathy shown by the Taliban as it has direct impacts on the internal security of the state. So, while both sides say they have 'defensive reasons', they misread what each other is saying through suspicion and 'threat perception' (Jadoon, 2021).

The Afghanistan policy of PK has thus shifted towards selecting cautious engagement for the post-2021 scenario. That is not a formal declaration that Afghanistan's new rulers in the Taliban movement are recognized as the government, nor complete break-off from it. This encompasses Kabul engagement, regional involvement, counter-terrorism pressure, tougher border administration and forcing Pakistan to respond through coercive signals when it feels its concerns are disregarded. This is because the geography of Pakistan, the Afghan refugees, business, border communities, the connectivity and the security influence over the Durand Line make it impossible for Pakistan to be separated from Afghanistan. All the while, it can't bring to a normal level relation when the TTP is not resolved. Observed engagement represents Pakistan's response to insecurity and low levels of trust and is a reflection of Pakistani's cautious approach towards engagement (United States Institute of Peace, 2024).

This study has been important in linking together three issues which are discussed separately – the resurgence of the TTP, the Afghanistan policy of Pakistan and the security dilemma between Islamabad and the Taliban regime. There is existing literature on Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, which generally focuses on historical issues, strategic depth, refugees, and/or regional competition. Other work explores the TTP as a home-grown rebellion or a component of the militant environment in Afghanistan & Pakistan. The post 2021 scenario, however, requires integrated explanation due to the fact that currently the TTP has meshed with Pakistan's internal security, border policy, regional diplomacy and strategy towards the Taliban regime (ACLED, 2025).

In this article the author suggests that the TTP has emerged as the pivot of Pakistan's policy with Afghanistan after 2021. As for the early expectations in Pakistan the Taliban will return, they have come up against this frustration over the failure or unwillingness of Kabul to control anti-Pakistan militants. The Taliban, too, have their limitations: ideological promises, unity, and concern over defecting to the Islamic State Khorasan Province, and the necessity for them not to appear subservient to Pakistan. These are pressures that have created engagement without trust and pressure without resolution. Thus, Pakistan's policy is

interpreted as being conciliatory and has been influenced by the threat from the TTP, and continues to be guided by an unresolved security dilemma (Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies, 2026).

The article is divided into five parts. Firstly, it summarizes the relevant materials pertaining to Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, the Taliban regime, the TTP and the security dilemma. Firstly, it summarizes the relevant matters relating to Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, the Taliban regime, TTP and the security dilemma. Secondly, it constructs theory and provides the explanation of the security dilemma working in Pakistan's relation with the Taliban regime post 2021. Thirdly, it discusses the resurgence of TTP and its effect on the threat perception of Pakistan. Fourth, it looks at Pakistan's cautious engagement approach, namely a diplomatic, border management, refugee policy, regional coordination and coercive pressure. Last, it explores its implications for the region and reasons that "balanced security pressure and dialogue" as well as having front lines "freeze," require tangible proceedings by the Taliban against the TTP, and better border control measures.

Literature Review

Geographical considerations and issues of border insecurity, strategic depth, refugee issue, and regional rivalry have been traditional determinants of the literature on Afghanistan policy of Pakistan. Afghanistan has held a special place in the concept of security in Pakistan's imagination as every event taking place over the Durand Line has had a significant impact on domestic security in Pakistan, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province and the former tribal areas. This has been found in prior analyses that Pakistan's foreign relations with Afghanistan have not been usually bilateral; instead they are profoundly tied up with the involvement of threats of encirclement by Pakistan from its neighbours, threat of India's influence, threat of Pashtun nationalism and finally the threat of hostile or unfriendly regime in Kabul. This historical backdrop holds significance because it proves that Pakistan's post-2021 policy was not an out-of-the-blue occurrence, rather it had evolved over time alongside a trend of securitisation in Pakistan's approach towards Afghanistan (Barfield, 2010).

The other literature examines the Taliban movement and its resurgence of power in August 2021. The Taliban's return to Kabul ushered in a new political system in Afghanistan, yet one that is not a complete normalized state system. Under the regime, there was a lack of acceptance for democracy (diplomatic isolation), limited access to economic opportunities (economic constraint) and lack of internal political cohesion on change linked with unity of movement (intra-political unity). Subsequent to the 2021 control of the territories, scholars believe that the Taliban's governance is a result of ideological extremism, military success, weak administration and a sense of unity within the Taliban. The present study finds this literature beneficial as they elucidate the reasons behind the failure of the Taliban regime to respond the Pakistan's demands against TTPs straightly. If Pakistan acts against the TTP it makes them happy, but it can also lead to internal tensions within the ideologically and militantly oriented networks within the Taliban community (Giustozzi, 2019).

This article also needs another solid foundation which can also be found in the literature produced by Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan. The TTP was constituted in 2007, as an umbrella group of the militant group in the tribal belt of Pakistan, working mainly in FATA. Its aim was not mere local militancy, it wanted to attack the Pakistani state, and mock the constitutional system and put its own militant idea of governance in place. While the military campaign in Pakistan had depleted the group in the mid-2010s, the TTP was by no means defeated. It has endured by migration, fragmentation and continuity of ideas. This history is important because of the reasons behind their swift reemergence after the Taliban gained control of Afghanistan, a relatively small part of their region (Jadoon, 2021).

The resurgence of the TTP is brought up in particular in the latest scholarship. The revival of the Taliban is seen by Sayed and Hamming to have brought two significant advantages for the TTP - symbolic and operational. The Taliban triumph reinforced the idea of the TTP that a stronger state can be beaten by a militant movement that is persistent, ideologically disciplined, and utilizes a territorial approach. In operational terms, the new situation on both sides had made it easier to regroup, recruit, move, and gain access to new superior arms for these "other groups. In some operational aspects, the new situation on both sides had made it easier to regroup, recruit, get around, put up propaganda screens and to acquire new superior arms to these "other groups". A more localised approach was being pursued in the TTP which had much more accorded to the border regions of Pakistan and the security apparatus of the provinces. This is not a law and order issue—it is part of Pakistan's Afghanistan policy and is a key medium to medium-term player for Pakistan (Sayed & Hamming, 2023).

The TTP is, moreover, one of the most critical elements of the internal security of Pakistan, making it the subject of serious studies from a security perspective. According to recent conflict figures, the group is increasing the intensity as well as geographical reach of raids, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and neighbouring regions. The violence is targeted primarily at security forces, police, and civilians affiliated with the state—the latter are commonly state-backed civilians, indicating that its aim is to kill security forces and break the state's ability to assert authority in border areas. This literature matters, because of the fact that the invocation of concerns about TTP are no longer abstract or overhyped – but rather connected to patterns of violence, territorial contestation and governance pressure (Pandya, 2025).

One strand of literature looks at the evolving Pakistani reaction to the Taliban regime. Pakistan did not take the decision to recognize the Taliban government formally after August 2021, but chose not to stand entirely apart from it either. It, instead, kept the lines of communication open, along with support of humanitarian nature, continued discussions along the border and continuously called for action against anti-Pakistan militants. This policy pattern suggests that there is nothing simple about Pakistan's approach; it is not merely one of support/hostility, recognition/isolation. It is more commonly recognized as a "slow approach" and Pakistan continues to maintain pragmatic ties while making meaningful relationships contingent upon alleviating concerns regarding counterterrorism (United States Institute of Peace, 2024).

The emphasis on the official side has been on the issue of terrorism coming from the land of Afghanistan while relations with the Afghan capital had increased. Islamabad has said that the Taliban government has not yet taken any convincing measure to curb the activities of TTPs in Afghanistan. From the official discussions it is clear that instead of defining the security issue between India and Pakistan as a problem of national security, Pakistan problematizes it as the responsibility of cross border communities, while occasionally the Taliban state as a matter of law that Afghan territory is not being used for attacks. The difference between Pakistan's allegations and Kabul's response has resulted in a huge mistrust gap. Importance: The conflict has not only carried the essence of militant violence but also one pertaining to the definition of responsibility, sovereignty and credible commitment (MoFam, Islamabad, 2025).

There is also a literature available on Pakistan internal counter terrorism policy that adds to this debate. One reformist policy already advocated is that Pakistan has been too militaristic, has failed to deal effectively with political reconciliation, local governance, policing reform, and development in the borderlands, and widows and disabled people are often denied effective protection against the discriminatory violence of militants. There is a number of studies that argue that Pakistan's efforts to thwart militancy have been deeply rooted in military operations, intelligence gathering, and measures for temporary security, while political reconciliation, local governance, policing reform, and development in the borderlands have still not been comprehensive. This is important because the TTP problem can't just be attributed to Afghan sanctuaries but it is also related with governance shortcomings, local grievances, and the lack of political assimilation of the old tribal areas. Thus, it is important to understand the domestic origins of militancy within Pakistan when considering the country's policy towards Afghanistan (International Crisis Group, 2026).

These empirical debates are linked by theoretical accounts from the security dilemma literature. These findings are linked with theoretical accounts from the security dilemma literature. The security dilemma is the tendency of actors to react defensively to acts of other actors that they act defensively at, which were intended defensive. While its roots lie in an understanding of the relationship between the states, it is applicable to the relationship between Pakistan and the Taliban regime as the Taliban is the 'de facto' government of Afghanistan. For pressure on Kabul, Pakistan wants to see as a form of defence against TTP attacks, while for the Taliban, such steps as border closures, airstrikes, expulsions and pressure on Islamabad signifies any move "hostile" against the Afghan sovereignty. This theory provides explanations about how both sides remain suspicious of one another despite their preference for maintenance of continuity (Booth & Wheeler, 2008).

In the face of these literatures, there is a great need for clarity. Baselines, core analysis of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations and existing studies on the Taliban regime, the TTP and CT policy are mostly written separately. The post 2021 scenario needs a holistic explanation, though, as the TTP now ties up the domestic security with foreign policy of Pakistan for Afghanistan. Beyond just being a militant organization, the TTP represents a policy-shaping factor which impacts border control, refugee policy, diplomatic engagement, regional coordination, and the reluctance of the Pakistani government to normalize relations with the Taliban regime. In this respect, this article tries to fill the lacuna to suggest the Pakistan's Afghanistan policy following 2021 can be analyzed jointly by referring TTP threat, security dilemma and cautious engagement.

Theoretical Framework

The security dilemma is chosen as the general theory of the article. The security dilemma in international relations indicates that an increase of security by one party to the relationship can actually lead to the non-security party becoming insecure, without the parties implying or envisaging war against one another, but rather defensive measures are perceived as aggressive or threatening. This framework serves well for Pakistan after Afghanistan's 2021 Taliban regime for both sides consider their efforts defensive in nature, but believe the other side is creeping toward the threat of attacks on them. (Herz, 1950)

Classical security dilemma is about how one secures oneself while being perceived as a threat. Pakistan sees diplomatic pressure, border regulation, intelligence ops, refugee documentation and calling for concrete action against the TTP as defensive actions. But, the Taliban might see these measures as an interference in Afghan affairs, pressure or an assault on Afghan sovereignty. Therefore, on one hand it means one thing, and on the other hand, it means another. (Tang, 2009)

The situation is further complicated by the political situation in Afghanistan itself. While the Taliban has not been officially recognized by any country, it maintains influence over areas, borders and institutions of security. For practical purposes, Pakistan should reach out to it, however verification is restricted due to lack of recognition. Pakistan fears that the Taliban aren't ready nor willing for action against the TTP, while Taliban fears Pakistan's demands could have an influence on Kabul.

It is important to stress that the post-2021 resurgence in TTP is the independent variable and the Afghanistan policy of the Pakistan government towards the Taliban is the dependent variable. However, there are intervening factors such as the ideological relationship between the Taliban and the TTP, pressure on domestic security, the Taliban unity, the border tensions, refugee management, regional diplomacy, and the non-recognition. To understand why Pakistan has embraced "engage" over "recognize," "isolation," or "confrontation," it is important to consider these variables.

It is also a dilemma for the Taliban. If there is strong action against TTP chances are that they will either lose their sympathizers or divide them, or drive them toward Islamic State-Khorasan Province. Lack of action will affect Pakistan affairs and it will attract coercive pressure. Thus, not only are they not directly supporting the TTP, but this may also be due to ideology, calculations, and a fear of dismembering themselves.

This is a framework to explain "weak trust": Pakistan is calling for tangible steps, and the Taliban see verification as intrusions. The more pressure put on TTP, the more resentment felt by the Taliban, less cooperation, more pressure on TTP. So, the TTP creates a vicious circle of security, thus, Pakistan's security policy is prudent and security-oriented.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research design because it examines policy behavior, threat perception, diplomatic practice, and security interpretation rather than numerical measurement alone. It is explanatory and analytical, aiming to explain how the TTP has shaped Pakistan's Afghanistan policy and why Pakistan adopted cautious engagement toward the Taliban regime. A qualitative approach is suitable because it examines official statements, policy documents, security reports, and scholarly interpretations in context (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The study relies mainly on document analysis. This method is appropriate because the article uses publicly available sources, including official statements, United Nations reports, think-tank assessments, scholarly literature, conflict datasets, and credible media reports. Document analysis helps identify patterns in policy language, threat framing, and changes in Pakistan's position over time (Bowen, 2009).

The article also uses process tracing to explain the sequence from the Taliban's return in August 2021 to Pakistan's initial optimism, the TTP's resurgence, failed assurances, pressure on Kabul, and cautious engagement. This method connects causes and outcomes by showing how the TTP became central to Pakistan's calculations (George & Bennett, 2005).

The study focuses on Pakistan-Afghanistan relations after August 2021, especially Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, former FATA, Balochistan, and eastern Afghanistan. Its data comes from Pakistan's official statements, UN and international security reports, think-tank assessments such as USIP, ACLED, ICG, and PIPS, and academic literature. A limitation is that Taliban internal

decision-making and the exact Taliban-TTP relationship cannot always be verified through open sources. Therefore, the study relies on documented trends and credible assessments.

Historical Background

Geography and border insecurity, ethnic linkages, refugee movements are all part of the history of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations and so are regional rivalry. The Durand Line is territorial, social, tribal, economic and strategic and thus Afghanistan has always been sensitive since 1947. Early opposition to Pakistan by Kabul to UN membership and support for Pashtunistan led to mistrust and thus to a focus on sovereignty and security (Barfield, 2010). The Cold War era intervention made Afghanistan a big continental contest ground for the Soviet Union. Pakistan became a frontline state in resistance war against Soviet invasion, hosted millions of refugees, and supported resistance groups with U.S. and Saudi Support. It was a policy of securitization and fortified the militant networks that would eventually lead to the emergence of the Taliban and northerly insecurity in the west. It was a policy of securitization and reinforced militant networks that would later have a role in the emergence of the Taliban and the insecurities in the north of the Western borders.

For Pakistan the Afghan Taliban's rise in the 1990s was the first bit of order in the wake of civil war—a bunch of men that could assure trade routes, reduce influence by the one country that Pakistan actually disliked, and remain friendly to Islamabad. But the first Taliban-installed government created isolation and room for the international transnational extremist networks. Post 9/11 counterterrorism attacks culminating in the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan and the establishment of the Afghan Republic, the relationship with the Taliban, the United States and the Afghan Republic remained unstable and there was a lack of trust. (Rashid, 2008) The tribal region of Pakistan became unsteady post 2001 as militants recuperated and reorganized after crossing the border. The TTP formed in 2007 roughly made the problem of Afghan conflict spillover a direct problem of the internal order in Pakistan because, unlike the Afghan Taliban, the TTP tried to pose a threat to the state and constitutional order in Pakistan (Jadoon, 2021). Foreign military presence, Indian influence, Afghan refugees, border fencing and anti-Pakistan militancy were the major factors that influenced Pakistan's policy during the Afghan Republic period (Fair, 2014). It was seen that Pakistan had regained the hope to see Taliban more present in August 2021 that they will rein in anti-Pakistan militants operating in Kabul. Rather it became a security dilemma to engage the Taliban rather than a strategic opportunity with the Taliban's resurgence (Sayed & Hamming, 2023).

TTP as Security Challenge

The TTP has turned into the biggest internal and external security threat to Pakistan following the Taliban's resurgence. In fact it isn't just some kind of militant tribe, it's a coordinated anti-state group with all these targets: soldiers, police, intelligence, tribal chiefs, political figures, even schools, minorities, and civilians who have any affiliation with the state. This reveals its intention of losing lives in border areas and diminishing the legitimacy of the state (Abbas, 2014). It poses a threat because of its ideology to reject the constitutional structure of Pakistan. A complex aspect of the fight is its articulation in terms of militant religion and its demand for a certain alternative approach to governance which renders negotiations challenging as a conflict is not solely about material grievances, but also about Akhtar, 2023 bounded choices (Akhtar, 2023).

The military action in Pakistan (2009-2017) has made the TTP weak in the Swat region, South and North Waziristan, but not eliminated. Many fighters came to Afghanistan, while others found their way and stayed alive in the dark via underground systems, splinters and alliances. Military pressure has curbed capacity making it harder to weaken, but far-reaching influence of ideology and structure of insurgency (International Crisis Group 2014). The group was revived in the post-2021 environment. The Afghan Taliban's victory provided a morale boost for the militants: An insurgency can outlast a stronger state. While the Afghan Taliban and the TTP are two distinct groups, there are also historical and ideological connections which made it conducive for them to collaborate along the border (Sayed & Hamming, 2023).

The TTP gained organizationally by being able to unite splinter groups, consolidate the media, intensify towards media propaganda and localize anti-state camps against the police, checkpoints and against the state's representatives (Jadoon & Sayed, 2022). After the collapse of the Afghan Republic, concerns have been voiced about the fact that Afghan militants might have access to advanced weaponry left behind in Afghanistan that may enhance their attack capability (United Nations Security Council, 2024). The mountain, interconnected borders allow travel, supply, shelters and recruitment even with the fencing.

The weak governance mechanisms also contribute to the influence of the TTP. The integration of old FATA into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has been accompanied by the possibilities of rights and development, but the delayed reforms, the weak policing, delayed justice, economic grievances and local dissatisfaction have left space for the possibility of intimidation on the part of militants and the establishment of parallel authority recently (Yusuf, 2022). The concern for Pakistan is further strengthened because of the link of the TTP with Afghan Taliban. There was an expectation in Islamabad that Kabul would be able to contain or move TTP terrorists out of the country, but the indifferent attitude of the Taliban has led to the frustration of Pakistanis. Kabul could be worried that aggressive measures may erode the unity among its citizens, but also widen the arms of them being drawn to ISKP (Giustozzi 2023). Hence, TTP moulds Pakistan's overall border regime, policies regarding refugees, trade restrictions, military policies and foreign policies with regard to Kabul (Pandya, 2025).

Pakistan's Post-2021 Policy

Pakistan's Afghanistan policy after 2021 is based on expectations, disappointments, security concerns and diplomatic requirements. When the Taliban had taken over Pakistan, Pakistan had acted in a cautious but active manner. In being non-formal and non-linimpar (Tayyebnia 2019b), it did not endorse the Taliban government, while closing Kabul was not on the agenda, economic catastrophe was not mentioned, but it pledged humanitarian assistance, and it practiced practical communication with Taliban authorities (Malik, 2022). This was based on the assumption that engaged will come to an end to instability, the movement of refugees, and militancy. But, the resurgence of the TTP thwarted those expectations. With a rise in the TTP-related violence, Pakistan again blamed the militants from Afghanistan for carrying out or planning attacks within the country in 2026 (Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS), 2026).

One of the key aspects of this policy is non-recognition and engagement in practice. The Pakistan Government denied recognition on the grounds of the lack of international consensus, issues regarding the inclusion, rights, women rights and terrorism in Pakistan. However, it cannot ignore the Taliban as they are in control of Afghan spaces like territories, Ministries, borders, and security institutions (Kaura, 2022). The demand of the hour in Pakistan is counter terror. Islamabad now wants concrete and verifiable steps against the TTP such as disruption of networks, relocation or arrest of militants and preclusion of attacks across the border (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, 2025).

Pakistan has, among other means, tried to implement border management as a policy instrument by fencing, controlling crossings, documentation and blocking them for a period of time. These measures limit the freedom of movement of militants but cause tensions between Kabul and border communities (Siddique, 2023). Refugee policy has also been "securitised". Pakistan, meanwhile, says that it must document and repatriate the nationals for security and law enforcement, whereas critics say doing so would cause humanitarian issues and harm ties with Kabul (Human Rights Watch, 2023). As diplomacy did not lead to a decline in the number of attacks, Pakistan resorted to 'coercive signalling' tactics through warnings, military deployments, intelligence measures and reported cross-border and counter-claimed strikes, although this strategy may escalate into conflict (International Crisis Group, 2026).

The concern is spread across the region and Pakistan has taken the issue of the TTP up in bilateral and regional gatherings, such as those between Pakistan and China and Pakistan and Afghanistan. China has interests in Pakistan's counterterrorism, connectivity and stability which provide further leverage for the country to urge Afghanistan to cooperate (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, 2025). Border closures still affect trans-border trade and market operations which undermines economic ties (World Bank, 2024). The impact of pressure is not confined to domestic, either, in as far as it generates a call for increased measures to address attacks (Rana, 2024). In general, the policy of the Pak govt is 'negotiate' for geographical relevance and 'pressures' for TTP.

Security Dilemma Analysis

This is the explanation of post-2021 relation of Pakistan with Taliban regime in terms of security dilemma. It covers the dynamics of insecurity for an actor caused by his security measures when intentions are unclear and defensive sub measures look like attack measures (Herz, 1950). Here Pakistan sees the inactivity of the Taliban against the TTP as a threat while the Taliban considers that the pressure that Pakistani authorities are putting on Afghanistan is an attack on Afghan sovereignty. Pakistan thinks that if Taliban manipulate Afghanistan then it will also be responsible to keep the Afghan land from being misused against Pakistan. It is because when TTP attacks increase in intensity, Islamabad considers that the threshold of Taliban inaction is

reached, interpreted as "inability," "unwillingness," or "tolerance" and believes it can counteract it through the measures of border security, diplomatic pressure, intelligence and coercive signaling (Jervis, 1978).

The Taliban have a different take on the matter. Kabul could see Pakistan's demands as much too much; too much intrusive, and at the same time, could argue that Pakistan has its own militancy problem. The Pakistani airstrikes, fencing, deportations and pressure are considered as a challenge to sovereignty, not just limited counter terrorism (CT) measures (Booth & Wheeler, 2008). In this context, it implies an oppositional outlook because Pakistan understands that it is being defended – struck is an enemy attack – so it understands that it is being defended, that is, regulation; while Afghanistan understands that it is being coerced – cautioned is being managed – so it understands that it is being cautioned but not really being attacked – being managed – is called cautioned – so that is a political outlook, not a defensive one (Tang, 2009).

The conundrum is accentuated to the extent that Taliban have maintained a relationship with the TTP. While they are divided, the two groups demonstrate through their ideologies and history, battlefield experience and personal connections. What Pakistan doesn't know is whether or not the Taliban are being weak, divided or are showing sympathy for their own interests. The Taliban might be worried about this would divide the militants, desert them to ISKP, or lose their sympathizers (Kydd, 2005). An additional issue is validation. The assurances are false as Pakistan has not seen a decrease in violence, while as the Taliban does not wish to give way to outside interference on the grounds that it would invalidate its control (Fearon, 1995).

The cycle of escalation is as follows: whenever TTP attacks increase, Pakistan faces growing pressure, which leads to rising Afghan resentment, which thins cooperation, which in turn leads to increased opportunity for TTP attacks (Powell 2006). The challenge is compounded by weak institutions lacking, trust being low, intelligence cooperation struggling, and a lack of a crisis management system in place (United States Institute of Peace, 2024). Issues of domestic politics also limit compromise. This is putting pressure on the Pakistani government and the public to react, and it is the same pressure that is being brought to the Taliban's attention, requiring them to be careful not to look weak and make themselves look subordinate to Pakistan (Byman, 2022). Each attack can build mistrust and drive a wedge between Pakistan and the Taliban and encourage the decrease of cooperation between the two (Jones 2023).

Cautious Engagement

The 'post-2021 policy towards the Taliban regime cannot be described less than 'cautious engagement'. It is not a complete recognition nor a full isolation but a Pakistan can't be isolated due to unavailability of geographical constraints: tribal relations, refugee issues, trade corridors and security issues etc. between the two nations. Pakistan's instability is manifested through the various aspects of militancy, refugees, arms trafficking, narcotics, and in order to address this point, working channels without recognition are required (Weinbaum, 2021).

Meanwhile, Pakistan has not been able to fully normalize ties with Pakistan as the TTP problem is pending. It does not seem to be a good idea to start recognizing, let alone supporting, everybody while militants linked to Afghan sanctuaries are attacking soldiers, police and civilians. It might also diminish the Pakistani power by flanking noted tangible demands of diplomatic gains without any security pledges to the Taliban (Keurele, 2024). Open conflict with the Taliban would lead to displacement, disruption to trade, retaliation and radicalization, and once again it causes fear of open conflict for Pakistan (International Crisis Group, 2026).

Diplomacy takes place via embassies, envoys, regional meetings, security contact etc. Discussions in these channels on issues of borders, border-crossings, refugees, trade, and the activities of TTP have been peaceful but interaction has remained skeptical in view of the absence of the core demand in Pakistan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, 2025). While border securitization can mitigate infiltration, it can negatively impact communities reliant on movement and trade (Siddique, 2023). Refugee management is also a central feature of this strategy and Pakistan emphasizes its documentation and repatriation as a sovereign right, whilst humanitarian groups highlight "hardship and resentment". (Amnesty International, 2024) Pakistan's involvement in regional diplomacy, particularly via China-Afghanistan-Pakistan arrangements, fosters stronger ties between the two countries on security, connectivity, and counterterrorism and the exchange of pressure and incentives with Kabul (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, 2025). Whether the cautious engagement is successful or not hinges on the willingness to induce tangible activities by the Taliban against the TTP.

Regional Dimensions

This TTP problem is not just of Pakistan-Afghanistan concern; it's a South Asia problem, a Central Asia problem, a China security problem and a counterterrorism issue. Militant mobility and the laxity of border governance, Taliban non-recognition and competing connectivity projects in the region form the framework for Pakistan's conflict with the TTP (Goodson, 2001). For China, China is particularly important because it is worried about terrorism, the presence of Chinese nationals in Pakistan, the stability of CPEC, and regional connectivity. The Taliban engagement facilitates Pakistan to raise its concerns on counterterrorism in these trilateral forums (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, 2025).

India also aids in formulaizing Pakistan's calculations. Pakistan has always taken the Indian presence in Afghanistan as a regional threat and India has already limited its military presence in the country post 2021 making Pakistan more concerned of deteriorating relations with the Taliban as it would hurt Islamabad's influence (Pant, 2022). The issue of terrorism, narcotics, border security and connectivity is also of concern to the central Asian states. Despite the possibility of connecting South and Central Asia, the fear of transit projects and regional integration has been undermined by TTP related tensions in Afghanistan. (Laruelle, 2021) Finally, ISKP makes the situation more complex, as pressure on the TTP has the potential to result in defections or in militant competition, thus part of the reasons why there is some hesitation by the talibans (United Nations Security Council, 2025). The United States and western states are still relevant as regards concerns of terrorism, humanitarian access, women's rights and recognition (United States Institute of Peace, 2024). Hence, the problem of TTP in Pakistan needs a strategy for their cooperation, regional pressure measures, incentives and structured security strategy involving Pakistan, Afghanistan, China and other stakeholders.

Discussion and Findings

The conclusion of this article is that the TTP has become the biggest security backdrop on which Pakistan's Afghanistan policy is pivoted for the next year and beyond. The much sought-after return of Taliban to power in Afghanistan was to provide Pakistan with a safer security situation on its western borders. But that has been turned on its head by the TTP's comeback. The Taliban takeover brought a new set of policy dilemmas for Pakistan as it had to deal with the Taliban while at the same time exerting pressure on the Taliban due to anti-Pakistan activities of the militancy.

The second finding is that TTP has changed Pakistan's perception of Taliban regime. Prior to 2021, some Pakistani policy makers have had a naïve assumption that the Afghan Taliban could serve as a tool for AFP's stabilization or even restrict the influence of those who were hostile to Pakistan. But starting with 2021, Pakistan began to look at the Taliban regime by their treatment of the TTP. The next big question was not whether the Taliban had historically had strong ties with Pakistan but it had the will and capability to stop anti-Pakistan activities on the Afghan soil.

The third conclusion is that Pakistan-Taliban relations since 2021 are based on a security dilemma. Even the measures taken in Pakistan are seen as protectionism in response to the menace of terrorism, but the Taliban might consider it as a violation of sovereignty or coercion. On a similar vein, the Taliban can come out with its message of internal regulation, but Pakistan views its "prudence in not acting against the TTP" as one of "tolerance" or "support". It has created vented expectations, exacerbation, and reoccurring crises.

The fourth finding is that cautious engagement is sensible response to policy constraints. Pakistan cannot accept Taliban regime as Pakistan has not addressed the TTP threat. It can't turn its back on it, as this instability is directly impacting Pakistan. Force alone is not the option since there is a possibility of counter actions, displacement, and the wider instability if the military is resorted to only. Hence, Pakistan's policy toward Pakistan is based on communication, pressure, border control, regional diplomacy and coercive signalling.

The fifth is that the Taliban regime has certain limitations of its own. Perhaps the reluctance to take any decisive action against the TTP is due to ideologic empathy, historical battlefield dynamics, fear of division and fear that militants may join the ISKP. But this does not lessen Pakistan's security concerns, it would only explain the inaction of the Taliban. The fact that the Taliban regime's calculations makes the TTP issue tough to resolve through straight diplomatics demands makes the issue a complex one.

Sixthly, the issues of internal governance of the state also have their influence in Pakistan. The TTP problem cannot be resolved in the realm of Afghan sanctuaries. There are opportunities for militant influence due to weak policing, slow justice reform in merged districts, economic grievances, local mistrust, and the varied state presence in border regions. Thus, in the third aspect Afghanistan policy in Pakistan requires the internal political, administrative and developmental reforms.

The 7th finding is that regional diplomacy alone is needed but not enough. While China and other global actors can facilitate dialogue and bring pressure to the Taliban regime, they cannot replace Pakistan-Afghanistan security arrangements. The solution must be sustainable, with advocates demanding evident collaboration on counterterrorism efforts, frequent choke-point coordination on the borders, the sharing of intelligence and the establishment of the accountability for those that fail to comply.

In general, the article concludes Pakistan's policy towards Afghanistan after 2021 is neither pro-Taliban nor anti-Taliban in a simple way. It is an insecure, distrustful and necessary engagement approach. Primarily the TTP is the reason behind this policy because it is a port of entry for Pakistan's domestic security, crossing over into Pakistan for border affairs, the refugee policy, regional diplomacy and the relationship with the Taliban regime. The ties between Pakistan and the TTP will continue to be unstable if there are no concrete and consistent methods to resolve the issue.

Conclusion

Pakistan has had both hopes and apprehensions following the re-establishment of the Taliban in August, 2021 in Afghanistan. Islamabad had hoped a Taliban government would be more receptive to their concerns, and would help mitigate security threats coming from across the Afghan border. But when the TTP returned, these hopes and aspirations were turned into a very real policy question. Due to the direct danger to Pakistan's internal security, the TTP conspired to test the political will and capability of the Taliban government to deal with the anti-Pakistan militants and emerged as the primary motive behind Pakistan's policy vis-à-vis Afghanistan in 2021.

The security dilemma framework has been introduced as a tool to explain the nature of Pakistan's relations with the Taliban regime as argued in this article. Pakistan's actions to check Kabul, its border closures and counterterrorism measures are defensive against the TTP. But such moves by the Taliban could be seen as pressure or intervention in Afghan affairs. Taliban hesitation to take concrete action to taint the TTP also adds to the insecurity of Pakistan which, in turn, bolsters Islamabad's conviction to exert pressure harder. The tension, which hits both sides every now and then, is caused by this cycle of mistrust.

The policy response in Pakistan has thus been a release of rigorously measured engagement. Islamabad has resisted the Taliban leadership but has not distanced itself completely from it. It maintains diplomatic channels, is dealing with border problems, strives for regional coordination, and applies pressure as required. As per Pakistan's given options and choices, it can't be ignored, and the Taliban may not be completely trusted and open confrontation has heavy risks.

The article ends by stating the TTP and the future of Pakistan-Taliban relations are largely tied together. For sustainable stability, tangible steps must be taken on the fronts TTP networks, improved border management, solid cooperation in the field of counterterrorism and in Pakistan also reform in affected border areas must be taken place. If these weren't done, cautious engagement would continue to be a short-term crisis management instead of Pakistan's durable roadmap in Afghanistan.

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