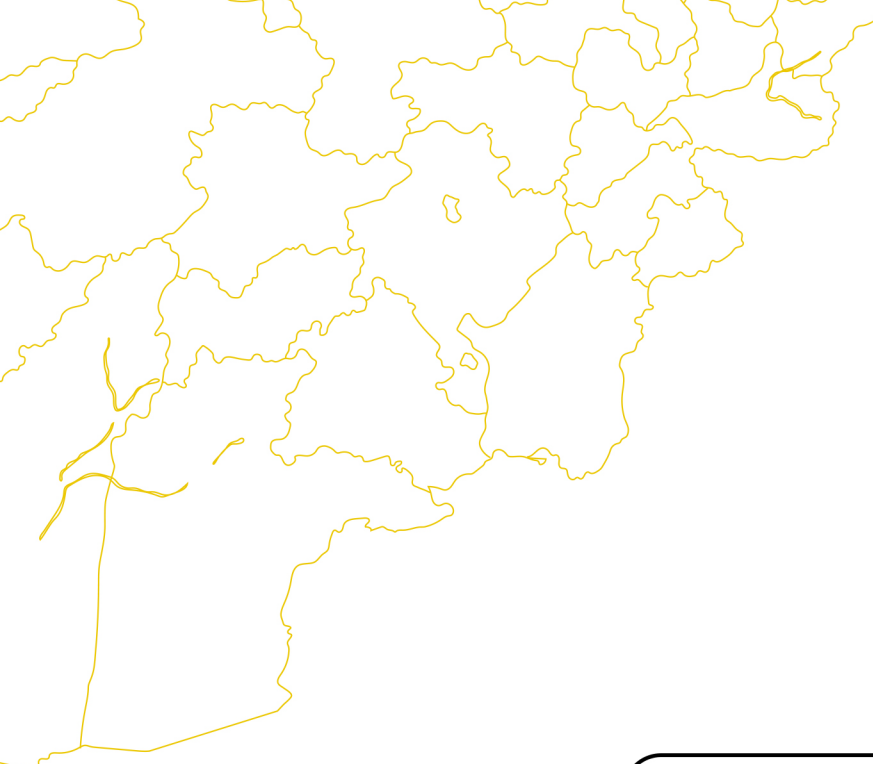




AFGHANISTAN

BEYOND THE HEADLINES

POST 2021 TRAJECTORY



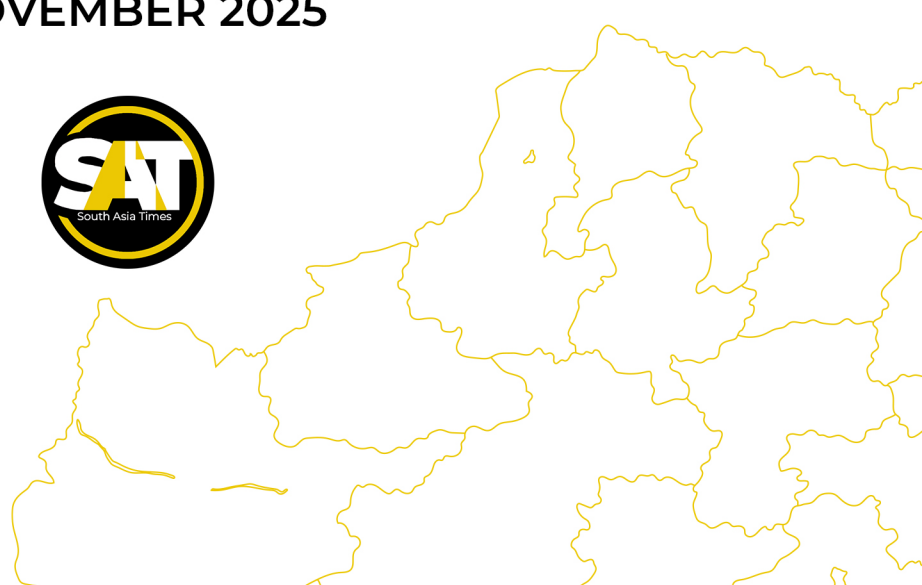
SAT STUDY

AFGHANISTAN

BEYOND THE HEADLINES

POST 2021 TRAJECTORY

SOUTH ASIA TIMES (SAT)
NOVEMBER 2025



Executive Summary

- From 2021 to November 2025, Pakistan–Afghanistan ties slid from guarded cooperation to open hostility. Hopes of TTP neutralization under the Taliban collapsed amid rising cross-border attacks, ideological rigidity in Kabul, and serial violations of the 2020 Doha Accord.
- Core finding: Post-2021 Afghanistan functions as a single, reinforcing system of failure due to exclusionary governance, economic contraction, sanctuary for ITOs, and regional spillovers centered on Pakistan in particular and the region in general.
- Security reality: Afghan nationals comprise 70–80% of recent infiltrations; 267 Afghans killed inside Pakistan were identified (Apr–Sep 2025), **including the son of the Deputy Governor of Badghis**. Pakistan has mapped 58 TTP/BLA sites in Afghanistan. TTP leader Noor Wali Mehsud resides in Kabul with a US\$43,000/month stipend and regime facilitation.
- Pakistan's policy shift (2023–Nov 2025): From accommodation to active containment, precision strikes inside Afghanistan (Mar/Jul 2025), border closures (Torkham/Chaman/Kharlachi), refugee repatriation (phase 1 Oct 2023; phase 2 in 2025), and tightened counter-infiltration against tashkeel movements.
- Diplomacy: Doha 2.0 and Istanbul tracks collapsed when Kabul refused written guarantees on neutralizing TTP/BLA. Major powers and forums (UN/SCO/Russia/China/Iran) now publicly flag Afghanistan as a terror hub.
- Domestic order: Pashtun-centric exclusion and gender persecution persist; Dari/Uzbek curbs deepen ethnic alienation. Economy has regressed to ~2010 levels (GDP per capita ≈ US\$417 in 2024; >90% poverty).
- Trade leverage: Afghanistan's ATT dependence shrank from ~US\$2.9bn (FY23–24) to ~US\$1.1bn (FY24–25) amid closures (losses US\$5–10m/day). Alternatives (Chabahar/Central Asia/Lapis Lazuli) are costlier and capacity-limited.
- Refugees: ~2.4 million returns in 2025 (mainly from Pakistan/Iran) overwhelm Nangarhar, Kabul, Laghman, Herat, Nimroz; state absorption is negligible, amplifying humanitarian strain.
- Factional risk: The Kandahari–Haqqani–Yaqoob split has hardened into a three-way contest with proxy use against Pakistan (Haqqanis via TTP; Kandaharis tacitly via BLA; Yaqoob positioning off Mullah Omar's legacy).
- India factor: Since 2023, Delhi has incrementally rebuilt influence in Kabul, such as diplomatic signaling, media amplification, and programmatic footholds, while Taliban factions reciprocate to offset pressure from Pakistan. Reports now indicate India plans an **"Afghan-Hindu"** research center (agri/skills cover), a soft-power beachhead that could function as **an Indian people-to-people-style hub** for agenda-setting and elite capture.
- Incident chain: From Muttaqi's India visit to Pakistan's October strikes, the Istanbul deadlock, the Wana attempt, Delhi's incident, and the Islamabad G-11 blast, IndoAfghan-aligned narratives framed a "revenge" arc. **Pakistani assessments read this as a coordinated multi-vector campaign designed to stretch Islamabad across diplomatic, information, and security fronts.**
- By late 2025, Islamabad faces a de facto hostile emirate exporting instability, with an economy in freefall but a militant ecosystem still highly agile. Pakistan's long-held aim for a friendly, non-hostile western frontier has instead morphed into a strategic bleed, with costs flowing into Pakistan across security, economic, and diplomatic domains.



1. Overview

Afghanistan's post-2021 landscape evolved into a complex security and political shockwave for Pakistan. A regime that many in Islamabad initially approached with cautious optimism transformed into a fragmented emirate exporting instability, hosting transnational militant networks, and leveraging proxies for internal and external bargaining.

From 2021 to late-2025, the pattern became consistent with the rising cross-border militancy, collapsing diplomatic tracks, intensifying border militarization, factional power plays within the Taliban, and growing Indian re-entry into Afghanistan. Each year widened the gap between expectation and reality, shifting Pakistan's engagement model from partnership to deterrence.

By 2023, Pakistan's policy pivoted decisively by moving from political accommodation to coercive calibrated pressure. Through 2024 and 2025, every pillar such as security, trade, humanitarian flows, refugee management, and regional diplomacy came under stress as Kabul refused to enforce counter-terror commitments and instead deepened ties with TTP, BLA-linked actors, and select external partners (notably India).

The cumulative effect is the emergence of a strategically hostile, factionalized, economically collapsing Afghanistan whose internal fractures (Kandahari–Haqqani–Yaqub and others) and external alignments now shape threat vectors for Pakistan across terrorism, border stability, information warfare, and regional geopolitics.

2. Purpose & Methodology

This study synthesizes inputs from the SAT Focus Group (12 Nov 2025), verified field informants, incident logs, and open-source intelligence (UN Monitoring Team 35th/36th, SIGAR 66th/68th, UNAMA, World Bank, UN Women). It establishes an action-oriented baseline for Pakistan's evolving Afghan policy.

3. Context and Background

- Since 1947, Kabul has not accepted the Pak-Afghan border. And historically, Pakistan has read Afghanistan mainly through a security lens, first “Strategic Depth” in the Soviet era, later countering Indian influence. The core aim has been a Kabul friendly to Pakistan to avoid a two-front “double stretch” against India.
- After Kabul fell in August 2021, Islamabad expected dividends that included TTP neutralization on Afghan soil. Instead, violence and militancy spiked in late-2022/early2023.
- Pakistan's civil-military officials' Kabul visit (5 Sept 2021) signaled early coordination on recognition, stability, and expectations. A short-lived “negotiated peace” track with TTP collapsed when TTP ended the ceasefire on 26 November 2022, followed by a sustained rise in terrorist attacks and casualties inside Pakistan.
- As ISKP activity widened and Pakistan's politics churned, Islamabad's demands hardened with emphasis to stop TTP attacks, TTP relocation away from the border, kinetic action against TTP sanctuaries in Afghanistan, and halt use of Afghan soil against Pakistan. However, Kabul's response stayed cautious. Ideological, cultural and historical ties with TTP, and reluctance to act decisively, fueled Pakistan's view that chaos post-US exit armed TTP, Afghan nationals feature in attacks, and TTA tolerance enables sanctuaries. Kabul, in turn, says Pakistan must also look inward and branded it as internal Pakistan's security issue. In addition, Taliban contextualized TTP personnel as refugees that went to Afghanistan as a result of Pakistan's military operations in Erstwhile FATA in the early 2000s.
- **By mid-2023**, Pakistan's Afghan policy had transformed from strategic accommodation to punitive actions.
 - Precision strikes targeted TTP hideouts in Kunar, Paktika, and Nangarhar, signaling the shift from diplomacy to calibrated force.
 - Periodic closures of Torkham and Chaman crossings followed terror incidents, paired with enhanced customs scrutiny and new fencing segments.

- Starting October 2023, Islamabad launched a nationwide campaign to repatriate undocumented Afghans, combining it with tighter visa and data verification systems.
- Pakistan intensified fencing and surveillance of border districts, especially Dir, Bajaur, North Waziristan, and Zhob, to block tashkeel infiltration from Afghan safe havens.
- Islamabad began publicly linking Afghan cooperation on counter-terrorism with trade facilitation, transit rights, and access to humanitarian aid, reframing engagement on conditional terms.
- **Through 2024**, relations continued to harden. Trade volumes declined, joint intelligence mechanisms froze, and both states weaponized media narratives:
 - Kabul accused Islamabad of “weaponizing trade and refugees.”
 - Pakistan responded with the fact that Afghanistan was “weaponizing soil.”
 - Pakistan repeatedly raised concerns and shared documented evidence over India’s use of third country (Afghanistan) to launch proxy attacks (mainly via TTP and BLA) within Pakistan.
 - Regional mediators like Qatar and China (backchannel) struggled to maintain dialogue as both sides hardened their rhetoric and field positions.

Hierarchy of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan



Organizational hierarchy of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan

4. 2025 (January – November): From Friction to Open Confrontation

- By early-2025, contact channels had collapsed. The India-TTP-BLA factor became more visible, both on the ground and in the digital realm.
- Pakistan halted high-level engagement, accusing Kabul of shielding TTP factions, responsible for attacks in KP and Balochistan.
- Then October-November's Doha and Istanbul formats became the last test cases of diplomacy, ultimately failing when Kabul refused to sign written guarantees on neutralizing TTP and BLA networks supported by India.
- Taliban signaling toward India intensified ahead of and during talks. Indian media ecosystems and Indo-Afghan aligned handles pushed sharp "revenge/sovereignty" frames after Pakistan's precision strikes, fitting prior election-cycle escalation patterns in India. This was in an attempt to harden Kabul's stance and box in Pakistan.
- In addition, during the first round of talks in Istanbul where Haqqnis were leading the talks, Taliban delegation attempted to bring TTP representatives at the negotiation table to talk to Pakistan, which was rejected right away. Since then, the situation deteriorated further.
- SAT is informed that TTP extended the oath of allegiance to Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada, the Amir al-Mu'minin of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, in late 2016, 5 months shortly after Haibatullah's predecessor, Mullah Akhtar Mansour, was killed in a United States drone strike in May 2016. This allegiance has been reaffirmed multiple times since then, most notably after the Taliban's 2021 takeover of Kabul.
- Notably, it is reported that TTP's central shura and spokespersons (including Muhammad Khurasani) routinely refer to Haibatullah as their Amir al-Mu'minin in official communiqués. Following the Taliban's victory, TTP's 2022 statement congratulated Haibatullah and pledged to implement "Sharia across the region." The group's constitution (Nizam-e-Shariat, 2008) explicitly binds it to operate under the leadership of the Emir of the Islamic Emirate, that is the Afghan Taliban leader, and views itself as the Pakistani extension of the broader Emirate:
 1. Post-2021, TTP formations were granted sanctuary across eastern Afghanistan, Khost, Paktika, Kunar, and Nangarhar, with local Taliban governors mediating Pakistan-TTP contacts on Haibatullah's behalf during the 2021–22 ceasefire effort.
- Therefore, the allegiance is formal, public, and enduring, rooted in Deobandi jihadist ideology and the notion of a singular, transnational Islamic Emirate. Strategically, it remains operationally flexible as the TTP wages its own insurgency in Pakistan while enjoying Afghan Taliban protection and ideological cover, making Kabul's denials increasingly implausible.

4.1. Border Militarization

- By early-2025, Pakistan–Afghanistan relations had entered a decisive breakdown. Contact channels were suspended after repeated terrorist attacks in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan traced back to TTP sanctuaries in Afghanistan. Pakistan accused Kabul of shielding and sponsoring cross-border proxies, while the Taliban leadership dismissed it as an "internal Pakistani problem."
- The western frontier grew increasingly volatile. **What began in 2021 as the Taliban's effort to transform its foot soldiers from militias into a formal military quickly evolved into a resurgence of TTP-linked tashkeel infiltrations in 2025**, making cross-border skirmishes and firing incidents a near-daily occurrence.
- Since April 2022 till October 2025, Pakistan's precision strikes on TTP compounds inside Afghanistan marked a doctrinal shift to proactive deterrence. Kabul denounced the strikes as violations of sovereignty, while Islamabad framed them as legitimate selfdefense under international law.
- Moreover, smaller retaliatory clashes through mid-year reinforced fears of broader escalation.
- After repeatedly raising concerns at all levels, in response to sustained infiltration from Afghan soil,

Pakistan deployed new formations, fortified North Waziristan, Zhob, and Dir, and expanded drone-based surveillance and strike capability. The Taliban simultaneously reinforced Khost, Paktika, and Kunar, locking both sides into persistent tactical friction along the border.

- By 2025, it is also noteworthy that there have been attempts to influence the public sentiment against Pakistan, especially in the border areas.
- For instance, post-October 2025 clash and destruction of the Bab-e-Dosti at Spin BoldakChaman border, rallies erupted across Eastern Afghanistan in Laghman, Paktia, Khost, Nangarhar, and Kunar, the traditional Haqqani stronghold of Loya Paktia, while brief gatherings surfaced in Baghlan and Panjshir. As per the local sources, these were unsanctioned but orchestrated by the GDI, which exploited anti-Pakistan sentiment to mobilize locals.
- However, no direct Haqqani or government involvement has been confirmed, though GDI operators reportedly urged journalists to amplify the rallies. GDI is believed to have exploited strong anti-Pakistan sentiments in these border provinces to mobilize local populations. The campaign was run through **GDI's Directorate "O5"**, which manages tribal elders and border elites, instructing them to "bring people out." Ground sources also informed that afterward authorities planned to open a Kabul office for tribal affairs, staffed by elders and political representatives, seen as a move aimed at institutionalizing influence operations along the frontier.
- On 18 October 2025, Pakistan conducted precision strikes targeting Hafiz Gul Bahadur. According to SAT ground sources, Bahadur had been invited to a dinner hosted by the Haqqanis, where few local cricket players were also participating in a friendly cricket match arranged as part of the celebration gathering.
- The Doha and Istanbul formats became the final diplomatic tests. Both ultimately failed, most critically the Istanbul Dialogue (October 2025), where Taliban negotiators refused to sign written guarantees on counter-terrorism and anti-TTP & BLA clauses. Qatar and Turkey withdrew as mediators, citing "irreconcilable positions." Islamabad publicly warned that "strategic patience has limits," while Kabul threatened "reciprocal measures" if Pakistan continued overflights and targeted strikes.
- During the first Istanbul round, led by the Haqqani faction, Taliban interlocutors attempted to insert TTP representatives directly into the talks with Pakistan. This move, seen as a legitimization of a terrorist group, was rejected outright by Islamabad and precipitated the final diplomatic rupture.

4.2 From Doha 1.0 (2020) to Doha 2.0 (Oct 2025): The Road to Collapse

a. Doha Accord (2020): The Baseline Promise

The February 2020 Doha Accord was built on two simple commitments the Taliban made while they were not yet in government but controlled large stretches of territory.

- **First**, they pledged that the areas under their control would not be used for attacks against any neighbouring country, and that those areas would not serve as sanctuaries for international or regional militant groups.
- **Second**, they promised that after the US withdrawal they would transition toward an inclusive political process, open the system to all Afghan groups/ethnicities, and move toward a representative government.

However, once Kabul fell in August 2021, none of these promises were honoured.

b. Political Commitments (Part I) — Violations

- The Taliban never initiated an inclusive political process; instead, they took Kabul militarily. 5,000 prisoners released as a confidence-building measure; most returned to militancy.
- No intra-Afghan dialogue ever materialized; instead, the Taliban marched on Kabul.
- The resulting government remains ethnically exclusive and Pashtun-dominated, 49- member cabinet includes only 2 Tajiks, 2 Uzbeks, 2 Baloch, 1 Nuristani; all key portfolios held by Pashtuns.

- Women and minorities are systematically excluded from governance and education, constituting gender apartheid and ethnic marginalization.

c. Territorial Non-Use Commitments (Part II) — Violations

- The Taliban had assured that no area under their control would be used to harm or threaten neighbouring countries. This commitment was broken across the board.
- TTP, Al-Qaida, ISKP, ETIM, TIP, TTT, IMU, and BLA operate from Afghan soil with freedom of movement.
- Ayman al-Zawahiri was killed in central Kabul in August 2022, confirming the presence of senior international militants under Taliban protection.
 - Notably, the **SAT's ground sources report** that Mullah Yaqoob played a pivotal role in passing on the intelligence that resulted in the neutralization of Zawahiri just one year after the Taliban take over of Kabul. The act angered the Haqqanis over Kandaharis attempt to target their guest, under their protection.
- Moreover, the UN reports confirm Saif al-Adl and Hamza bin Ladin residing in Kabul under Taliban protection.
- GDI (General Directorate of Intelligence) issued guest-house allocations, movement passes, and weapon permits for TTP commanders, guaranteeing immunity from arrest. It is noteworthy that Zawahiri, at the time of execution, was also residing in a Haqqani safe house.
- UN Monitoring Team 36th Report (2025) identifies active training and ideological coordination among TTP–AQ–ISKP.
- In fact, the 2025 attacks highlight a consistent operational pipeline from Afghanistan into Pakistan. A few recent instances include, but are not limited to:
 - **Islamabad Judicial Complex (G-11) suicide attack:**
Executed by Afghan national Usman (Qari) from Achin, Nangarhar. His handler Sajidullah (Shina) confessed to receiving tasking from Dadullah inside Afghanistan, confirming a direct chain of command.
 - **Cadet College Wana assault:**
The attacker was assessed to be Afghan, consistent with infiltration corridors used by TTP's Khost–Paktika–Kunar networks.
 - **Afghan combatants killed inside Pakistan (Apr–Sep 2025):**
Pakistan identified 267 Afghan nationals killed during counter-terror operations, reflecting sustained cross-border militant movement.
 - **Involvement of Afghan officials' families:**
Among confirmed TTP militant fatalities was the son of the Deputy Governor of Badghis, indicating the presence of formal Afghan personnel in armed engagements on Pakistani soil.
 - **Cross-border firefights in North Waziristan, Zhob, and Dir:**
Multiple clashes in 2025 involved Afghan soldiers and Taliban-linked fighters, reinforcing the pattern of state-tolerated militant spillover.

d. Trilateral (2024 Pakistan–UAE–Taliban) — Breach

- Taliban accepted UAE funding to relocate TTP fighters away from the border. Only a few hundred were moved; no verification lists shared; infiltrations continued unabated.
- Financial transparency absent; field evidence shows **Taliban re-channeled portions of donor aid toward TTP logistics under the cover of “refugee assistance.”**

4.3 Financial Dependence without Reform

- Taliban regime receives roughly US \$80 million/month via humanitarian and donor mechanisms (including US-facilitated channels).

- Despite consistent inflows, no behavioral moderation occurred; rather, cross-border terrorism increased.

4.4 Doha 2.0 / Istanbul (2025): The Final Breach

- After the October clash, Pakistan and Afghanistan, under Qatar-Türkiye mediation, agreed to ceasefire on October 19 with next round announced to be held in Istanbul on October 25 in which Pakistan sought a written framework (Doha Agreement 2.0) to reanchor the Taliban to earlier commitments.
- However, in the Istanbul, Kabul rejected any clause implying accountability for TTP/BLA actions. The Taliban's Haqqani-led delegation to Istanbul not only attempted to include TTP representatives but also the inclusion of economic concessions.
- However, despite disagreements, a joint statement mentioning agreement on QUAD intel sharing, joint monitoring mechanisms and penalties was issued with the next meeting announced to be held in Istanbul on 6 November to finalize modalities of the interim understanding reached between Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban after six days of negotiations (25–30 Oct) mediated by Türkiye and Qatar.
- The November 6 round of the Istanbul talks however ended after the 13-hour marathon session, marked by intense back-and-forths and near-conclusive understandings.
- Two rounds of charters of demands were exchanged, and a working framework had begun to take shape. But when the draft reached Kandahar, everything flipped. Orders came back with instructions not to own the TTP issue. Kandahar reportedly feared that acknowledging it would validate Pakistan's case, a 90% win for Islamabad.
- Here, the Kandahari and Haqqani blocs seemed aligned under the larger "Greater Islamic Emirate" vision, keeping space for proxy elements as a pressure tool against Pakistan. Islamabad, on the other hand, by policy, view containment of these outfits as essential not just for its own security but for regional stability, the same groups that have already bitten Iran, China, and Russia.
- For Haibatullah, trade and visa routes remain lifelines he does not want interrupted. Therefore, even during the negotiations, Kabul sought to broaden the dialogue; Pakistan narrowed it. Reportedly, Pakistan's DG I said, "Security is our top priority. Everything else is auxiliary", and left the negotiation table. The talks ended with Qatar and Turkey suspending mediation; no channel remains functional as of November 2025.

5. International Terrorist Organizations (ITOs) in Afghanistan

Notably, UN 36th Monitoring Report (2025) and SIGAR 66th/68th confirm Afghanistan's transformation into a multi-organization terror hub:

	Group	Estimated Strength / Presence	Core Areas	Taliban Linkages
	Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)	≈ 6,000 fighters	Kunar, Khost, Paktika, Nangarhar	Guesthouses, stipends (USD 43,000 for Noor Wali), training w/ AQ, joint ops w/ ISKP
	Al-Qaida & AQIS	Cells in 6 provinces (Ghazni, Helmand, Kandahar, Kunar, Uruzgan, Zabul)	South & East Afghanistan	Three new joint training sites with TTP; senior leaders sheltered in Kabul
	ISIS-Khorasan (ISKP)	1,500–2,000 core fighters	Kabul, Nangarhar, Badakhshan	Conducted 85+ attacks since late-2023; tactical overlap with TTP
	East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM/TIP)	~ 500 fighters	Badakhshan	Strains China-Afghan ties
	Tehreek-e-Taliban Tajikistan (TTT) / IMU	≈ 4,500 foreign fighters	Northern corridor	Direct threat to Central Asia
	Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA)	≈ 300 terrorists	Kandahar, Helmand, Nimroz, Herat, Farah, Kabul	Four training camps (Walikot, Shorabak etc.); coordination with TTP; AQ ideological training

- March 2025 Moscow concert-hall attack traced to a cell trained and funded from northeastern Afghanistan, demonstrating global export capacity.
- Joint Statements (2025), Russia, China, Iran, SCO, CSTO, uniformly describe Afghanistan as a transnational terrorism base.
- Pakistan's evidence: identification of 58 TTP/BLA camps, recovery of NATO-origin weaponry (~ USD 7 billion worth) now in anti-Pakistan proxy hands, and confirmed deaths of 267 Afghan nationals fighting inside Pakistan (Apr–Sep 2025).



Group	Founded / Emergence	Current Status & Activity	FTO Designation
Tehreek-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP)	2007 – Formed under Baitullah Mehsud from unification of Pakistani militant groups	Active; based in eastern Afghanistan; conducts cross-border attacks into Pakistan targeting security forces and civilians	Designated on 1st September, 2010 by the U.S state department
Al-Qaeda (Core)	1988 – Founded by Osama bin Laden	Active; maintains strong ties with Taliban; operates training camps in several Afghan provinces	Designated on 8 October 1999 by the U.S state department
Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS)	2014 – Announced as South Asian affiliate of Al-Qaeda	Active but limited (<200 members); supports Taliban and operates mainly in Afghanistan and Pakistan from its bases in Afghanistan	Designated in 2016 by the U.S state department
Haqqani Network (HQN)	Late 1980s – Emerged during Soviet-Afghan war under Jalaluddin Haqqani	Active; Integrated into the Taliban government, particularly the Interior Ministry under Sirajuddin Haqqani and maintains deep ties with TTP.	Designated in September 2012 by the U.S state department
Islamic State – Khorasan Province (ISIS-K / IS-K)	2015 – Formed by exmembers of TTP and IMU pledging allegiance to ISIS	Highly active; responsible for masscasualty attacks in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, and Russia	Designated in January 2016 by the U.S state department
Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)	1998 – Founded by Juma Namangani & Tahir Yuldashev	Weakened; remnants allied with ISIS-K, some activity in northern Afghanistan	Designated in September 2000 by the U.S state department
Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM)	Late 1990s – Formed by Uyghur separatists	Active; uses Afghan soil to target Chinese interests in region; maintains links with Al-Qaeda and TTP	Designated in September 2002 by the U.S treasury department
Jundallah / Jaysh al-Adl (JAA)	2002–2003 – Founded by Abdolmalek Rigi; renamed Jaysh al-Adl in 2012	Active; based in Iran's Sistan-Baluchistan with presence across Afghan border areas; targets Iranian forces and Shia civilians	Designated in November 2010 by the U.S state department (amended in 2019 to include the group's new "Jaysh al-Adl" name.)

International Terrorist Groups Operating in Afghanistan

Hence, from Doha Accord 2020 to Doha 2.0 2025, every major commitment, political inclusion, human rights, counter-terrorism, and regional non-interference, has been violated. The Taliban's strategic partnership with TTP, the institutional complicity of GDI, and the failure of the Haqqani-led Istanbul initiative mark the formal collapse of all diplomatic architecture between Islamabad and Kabul.

By November 2025, the relationship has shifted from mistrust to open hostility, underpinned by verifiable patterns of terrorism, ideological alignment, and the weaponization of Afghan soil against Pakistan.



6. Economic Fallout: Border Closures, Diversification Claims, and Ground Reality

SAT's trade interlocutors in Kabul, including chamber representatives and truckers at Torkham and Spin Boldak, quietly concede that while the rhetoric says "we can live without Pakistan," the numbers and daily hardship say the opposite.

• Border closures and stranded cargo

Closures of Torkham, Chaman, and Kharlachi since 11 October 2025 have frozen bilateral trade worth over US\$1.8 billion annually, with estimated losses now running into hundreds of millions of dollars. Around 11,000 containers are reported stuck, not only Afghan cargo but also Central Asian (CARs) consignments of ghee, cotton, and other bulk goods. At least 50 containers of fresh fruits and vegetables either rotted in transit or were dumped at 50–70% below market value, wiping out entire seasons for farmers and middlemen.

• Customs, local incomes, and the illusion of resilience

Afghanistan's customs revenues, heavily dependent on around 70% of exports and imports transiting Pakistan's corridor to Karachi and Port Qasim, are estimated to have fallen by 25–30% in Q4 2025. While US dollars continue to enter via UN and NGO channels, that money is thinly spread and highly centralized.

In contrast, ATT and bilateral trade through Pakistan pay thousands of drivers, loaders, brokers, shopkeepers, and cold-storage operators in cash, every day, which is now abruptly choked. Afghan traders also complain about Pakistan's charges and stricter documentation on Afghan cargo at Pakistani ports, but even with these costs, they acknowledge that the Pakistan route remains cheaper and more reliable than the alternatives.

• Baradar's hard line vs economic geography

On 12 November 2025 in Kabul, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, Deputy PM for Economic Affairs, delivered one of the sharpest public rebukes of Pakistan to date. He accused Islamabad of "politically exploiting trade and humanitarian matters," gave traders three months to settle Pakistani accounts and shift to Iran, Central Asia, and India, and warned that beyond this window, the Emirate would "not take responsibility" for anyone still doing business via Pakistan. He framed the choice starkly: either firm guarantees that routes will never close, or "no need for trade at all."

Baradar's pivot toward India is also shaped by his own background, he received formal education and training in India during his early political years, a detail widely noted by Afghan and regional analysts. This history helps explain why his economic outreach consistently leans toward Delhi, aligning neatly with India's calibrated re-entry, including proposals such as the "Afghan-Hindu" research and agri-capacity centre, which would give India a soft-power and policy foothold inside Kabul's economic ecosystem.

• Alokzai's counter-narrative from the trading floor

In contrast, SAT's conversations with Khan Jan Alokzai, head of the Afghan chapter of the Pakistan–Afghanistan Joint Chamber of Commerce, reveal a more sober view. Alokzai openly acknowledges that "Karachi and Torkham are still the best options for Afghans; trade has to be done there. If they stay closed, we will have to look elsewhere." He estimates around US\$1 million in trader losses per day, notes the spoilage of fruit and vegetables, and warns that a sudden, political decoupling from Pakistan, especially in critical imports like pharmaceuticals, could "hurt Afghanistan more than Pakistan." His message is clear: diversification is necessary, but replacing Pakistan is not realistically possible in the short to medium term.

• Winter, northern routes, and the air-corridor myth

As winter sets in, northern routes via Hairatan–Salang and the Central Asian corridors slow to half capacity or shut down altogether due to snowfall and avalanches. Iran's Chabahar route and Central Asia options add roughly 20–30% to transport and handling costs and can absorb only a fraction (often $\leq 20\%$) of the volume that used to move through Torkham and Chaman.

The much-publicized air corridors to India, the Gulf, and China help high-value exports like pine nuts and saffron, but even optimistic Afghan government figures suggest that air freight accounts for only

about 1–3% of Afghanistan's total trade volume. Even with new subsidies and cold-chain upgrades, air corridors cannot replace the bulk, lowmargin flows of food, fuel, and construction materials that used to move via Pakistan's flat, all-weather corridor.

- **Impact on the Afghan common man**

On the ground, the result is brutal: food prices rising 15–20%, diesel and fuel imports down around 40%, transport jobs vanishing along the eastern belt, and small shopkeepers in Jalalabad, Khost, and Kandahar squeezed between higher wholesale prices and collapsing purchasing power. Pakistan's US\$400+ billion diversified economy can reroute volumes through Iran and India and absorb shocks. Afghanistan, with a shrinking, aid-dependent economy, is absorbing the closures directly in household kitchens, market stalls, and wage slips.

Net effect: while Taliban leaders publicly argue that Afghanistan can “stand on its own” without Pakistan and that diversification to Iran, Central Asia, and India is a strategic upgrade, the trade math and trader testimonies show the opposite. Pakistan can live with reduced Afghan transit; ordinary Afghans cannot easily live without Pakistani access.

7. Refugee Repatriation: Historical Continuity and Present Realities

- The 2025 repatriation surge is not an isolated Pakistani decision but part of a threedecade cycle. **Pakistan first decided to initiate structured returns in the 1990s**, but could not complete the process due to the Taliban–Northern Alliance civil war and absence of a functioning Afghan state. Post-9/11, a second push emerged under international frameworks, though insecurity again stalled mass repatriation. During the Karzai government(2014) and later Ashraf Ghani's (2016–18), refugee repatriation was raised with both governments acknowledging that Afghan refugees' legal basis in Pakistan was tied to conflict and persecution, not permanent residency. After the 2021 Taliban takeover, it was broadly understood, even by Kabul, that “the war is over,” implying a natural transition toward return.
- Afghanistan's absorption capacity remains critically weak not because of a lack of international assistance, **but due to Taliban governance failures and opaque financial management**. Even with steady dollar inflows via UN mechanisms and humanitarian channels from the US and other donors, essential public services remain underfunded. Of the 22.9 million Afghans requiring assistance in 2025, 14.8 million faced acute food insecurity through March, with 9.5 million projected at crisis levels by year-end. The humanitarian response plan is only 17% funded at the implementation level, despite sustained external cash injections.
- Meanwhile, La Niña-driven rainfall reductions of 30–50%, collapsing rural livelihoods, and the absence of any structured reintegration policy have created severe shelter and water shortages. UN agencies estimate 500,000+ families lack adequate housing, particularly in eastern and central provinces entering winter.
- In effect, the crisis is not the result of repatriation itself, but of the Taliban's inability despite receiving continuous foreign funds to create the economic, institutional, and administrative capacity needed to absorb their own citizens.
- **Repatriation is not unique to Pakistan**. Iran has expelled hundreds of thousands of Afghans since 2022; Türkiye continues deportations under its “irregular migration” framework; and European states (Germany, UK, Norway, Netherlands) have all pushed for accelerated returns, including Afghans who only transited through Pakistan. Even UN-sponsored relocation programs have stalled, leaving thousands of Afghan evacuees stuck in Pakistan because Western countries are unwilling to take them back. In simple terms: the global trend is repatriation, not permanent asylum. Pakistan is neither an outlier nor an aggressor.
- Taliban claims of “stability and normalization” contrast with limited service delivery. The Emirate has offered no significant housing, livelihood, healthcare, or reintegration programs. As a result, most returnees arrive destitute, pushing urban poverty in Kabul, Jalalabad, Herat, and Kandahar toward 75% and widening humanitarian gaps.

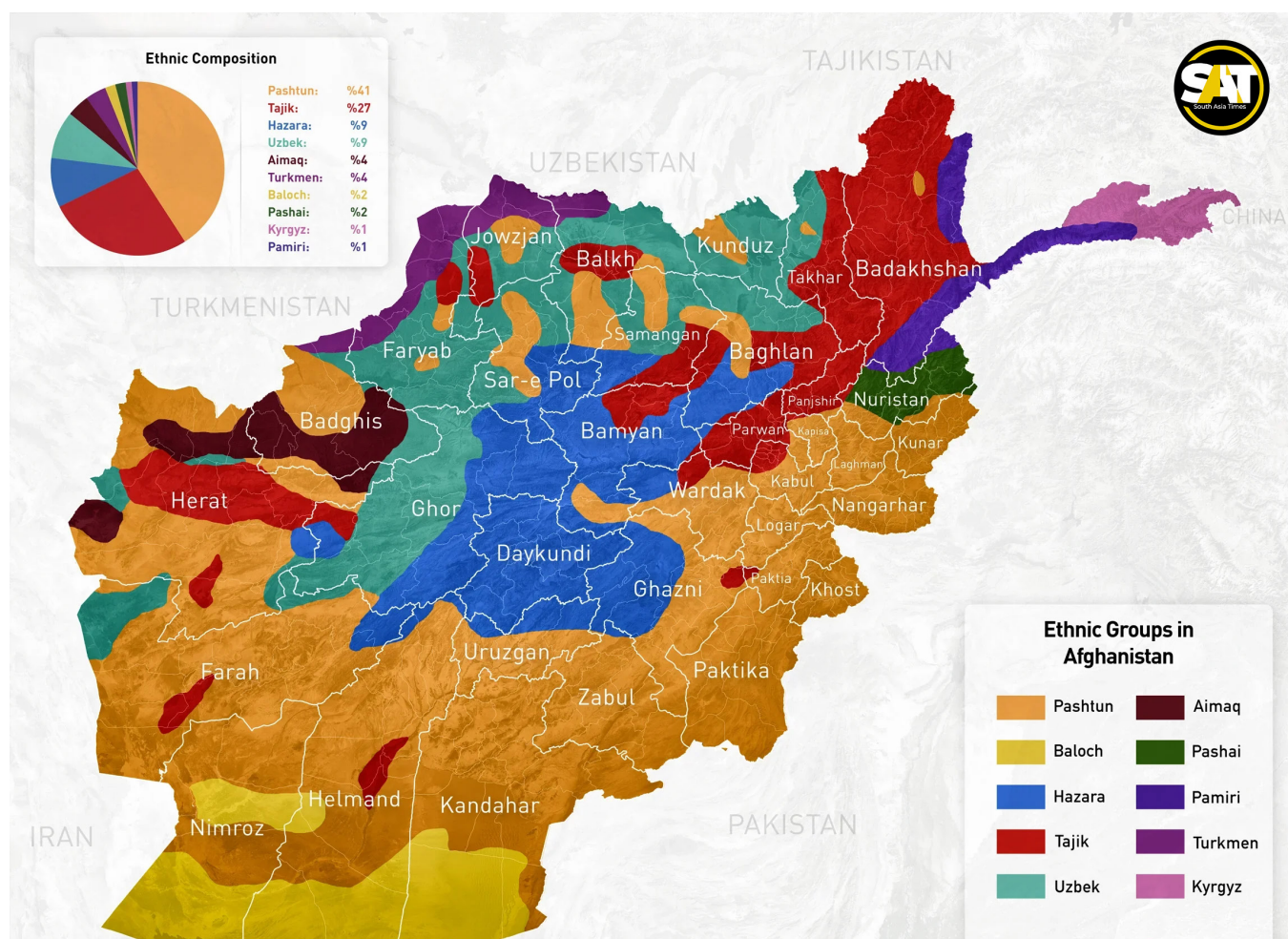
- In effect, the 30-year refugee cycle has resumed from earlier phases: Pakistan is implementing repatriation out of legal, economic, and security-based necessity, consistent with global practices, while Taliban government, despite asserting internal stability remains unable to absorb large returns due to structural governance and resource constraints.

5. Information Warfare

- A fierce digital propaganda war erupted. Kabul's state-aligned accounts accused Pakistan of "economic blockade," while Pakistani media framed the Taliban as "harboring transnational terrorism." Pashto nationalism and sectarian narratives deepened public polarization on both sides.
- Kabul's state-adjacent and GDI-aligned assets accuse Pakistan of blockade/airspace violations; Indian outlets and proxy handles synchronize "Pakistan isolated/terror incubator" frames, especially around high-salience incidents. Pre-bunk/post-bunk cycles coincided with Indian political timelines (e.g., Bihar polls), amplifying sovereignty/"revenge" rhetoric.
- As per SAT's ground sources, Social media is not being handled by one Taliban faction alone. It is overseen centrally by GDI through Khalil Hamraz, the spokesperson and media head who supervises the ecosystem. Under him:
 - Omar Baryal's network operates from Shashdark (Meaning, Six-Addresses), a VIP zone of Kabul near the ARG Palace, where GDI Directorates 90 and 40 are managed. Those not formally on GDI rolls are housed in Kabul Interior Ministry guest houses, which function as parallel content-production hubs.
 - A separate Haqqani-linked media-ops structure also exists, operating from two to three dedicated sites, funded by the Jalal Foundation, which covers events, book publications, and influence circles. Khalid Zadrani's book was published under the same network.
 - This ecosystem funds and manages influencers, spearheaded by Abdul Sattar Sadat former Karzai Chief of Staff, Kareem Khurram's political adviser, Ashraf Ghani's 2014 campaigner, Election Complaints Commission head, and later Ghani adviser. After Ghani's fall, Sadat repositioned himself and now lobbies closely with the Taliban through Haqqani structures.
- In Kandahar, every institution maintains its own media team, from spokesperson offices to religious bodies, producing videos, reports, and localized influence material aligned with Kandahari narratives and the Emir's decrees.
- Currently, much of the anti-Pakistan influencer activity is Haqqani-funded, amplified by Khalid Zadrani's circles and diaspora nodes. Taliban info-ops increasingly utilize the Afghan diaspora, running coordinated content campaigns from abroad as well as from Interior Ministry guest houses.
- Moreover, it must be noted that the proposed "Afghan-Hindu" center may institutionalize content pipelines (fellows, datasets, agri pilots) to legitimize Delhi's presence, seed pro-India frames in Kabul's policy discourse, and implant on ground assets. Hence, a dual-use node for influence ops, cadre grooming, and intel touchpoints.

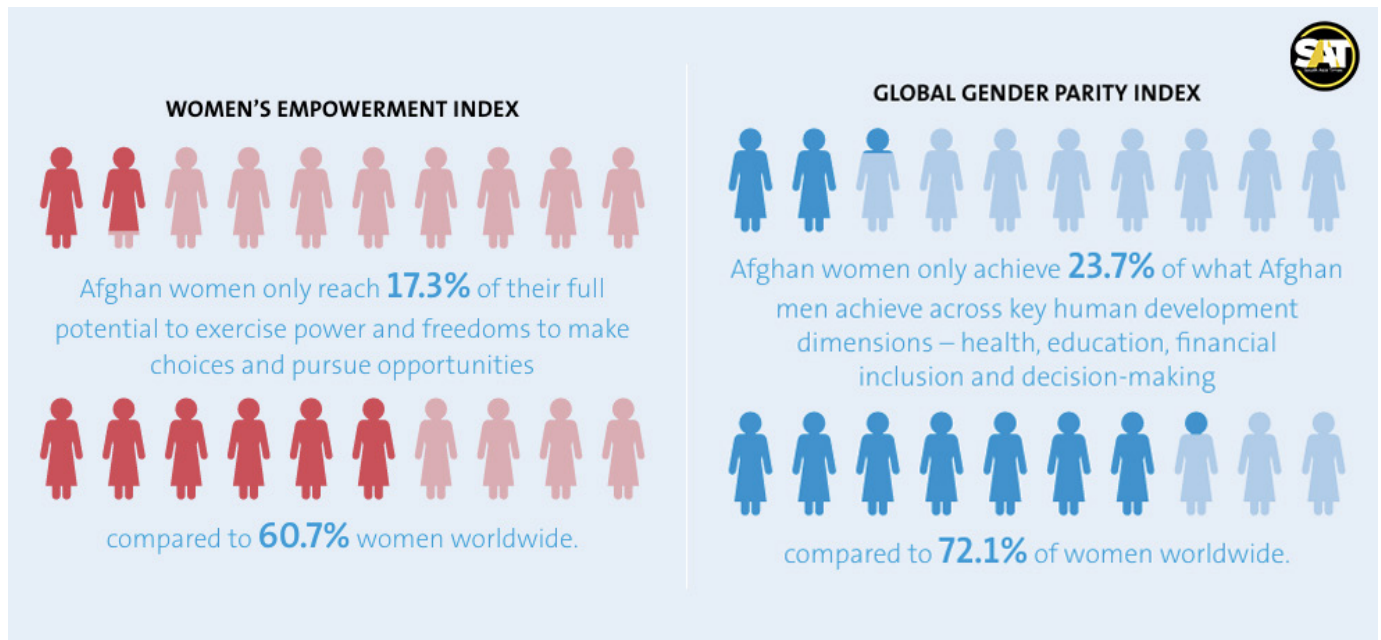
6. Political Governance & Social Controls in Taliban-Governed Afghanistan

- Exclusionary order: Afghanistan's current order is centralized, decree-based, and ethnically exclusive, shaped by the Taliban's fusion of Pashtun nationalism and Deobandi ideology. Power is overwhelmingly Pashtun-dominated (~42% of population).
- From Supreme Leader Haibatullah Akhundzada to top ministers Sirajuddin Haqqani and Mullah Yaqoob, while the 49-member cabinet includes only 2 Tajiks, 2 Uzbeks, 2 Baloch, and 1 Nuristani.
- Major ethnic groups, Tajiks (27%), Hazaras (9%), and Uzbeks/Turkmen (13%), remain marginalized across northern and central provinces. This structure mirrors the 1990s pattern when non-Pashtun factions viewed the Taliban as a Pashtun political project, not a national Islamic movement. Today, that perception endures: ethnic dominance has replaced inclusion, and governance reflects ideological cohesion over representation or stability.



Geographical overview of the primary ethnic populations of Afghanistan, including Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, and others.

- **Systemic gender persecution:** Since August 2021, the Taliban have imposed a structured system of gender exclusion, reflected in over 100 decrees restricting women's education, work, mobility, and public presence. Girls' secondary and tertiary education remains banned, with effective enrollment dropping below 10%, according to provincial education officers. These directives are enforced through the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice and provincial Amr bil Ma'ruf units, which routinely detain women for dress-code or movement violations.
- The closure of women-only workplaces, including the shutdown of beauty salons (an estimated **60,000 jobs lost**), and restrictions on NGO employment have significantly weakened female-headed households. Field reporting from Kandahar, Herat, Laghman, and Ghazni indicates rising cases of forced marriages, domestic violence, and a collapse of income options for widows and displaced families.
- Teachers, midwives, and local administrators describe an entire cohort of adolescent girls, grades 7 to 12, as effectively "removed from the system," with no pathways to formal schooling or vocational training. Enforcement is consistent across districts: women's rights defenders face arrests, intimidation, and custodial abuse, while mobility restrictions prevent access to healthcare and employment.
- Although the Taliban characterize these actions as temporary or culturally grounded, ground-level enforcement patterns across all 34 provinces indicate a deliberate restructuring of public life that excludes women from civic, economic, and institutional domains. Taken together, the bans on education, constraints on employment, erasure of women-only spaces, and sustained coercive enforcement amount to a systematic regime of gender persecution under internationally recognized benchmarks.



Afghanistan's standing in the global gender parity index

- **Ethnic/linguistic suppression:** Historically, Dari (Afghan Persian) functioned as Afghanistan's lingua franca, but under the current Pashtun-dominated regime, minority languages have been deliberately sidelined, mirroring Taliban policies from the 1990s. Recent directives have curtailed Dari and Uzbek use in official communication and signage (e.g., Jowzjan University), removing them from government media and institutional correspondence. This reflects the administration's view of linguistic uniformity as central to its Pashtun-centric ideological project, alienating the majority of Afghans who are not Pashtun.
- This linguistic marginalization is not occurring in isolation. A structural concentration of political and administrative power reinforces it. A detailed cabinet composition review (Amu TV) shows that the Taliban's governance is overwhelmingly dominated by Kandahar and a narrow Pashtun southern elite. **Out of 25 cabinet ministers, seven are from Kandahar**, but this underplays the depth of Kandahar's control. **All top national offices, the supreme leader, chief minister, deputy chief minister/economic czar, central bank governor, chief justice, and key security portfolios, are held by Kandaharis.**
- The Kandahar-centered leadership also controls education, higher education, finance, mines, public works, labor, rural development, and judicial structures. This creates a **hardwired hierarchy** where linguistic, regional, and ethnic representation is not merely neglected but structurally excluded. Critics describe this as an insular, exclusionary governance architecture that sidelines large regions of the country such as Kabul, Nangarhar, Herat, Balkh, and Bamiyan, none of which have any cabinet representation.
- The policy's impact extends into the military ranks, where growing disillusionment among non-Pashtun Taliban fighters, particularly Uzbeks and Tajiks, signals widening internal fractures. Simultaneously, reports of forced demographic resettlement reveal a broader ethnic-colonial project: thousands of Pashtun returnee refugees are being relocated to fertile northern provinces traditionally inhabited by Tajik and Uzbek communities. This state-sanctioned population shift is strategically designed to alter the demographic balance in non-Pashtun regions while using the refugee crisis as a cover to consolidate land and political control.
- This demographic engineering aligns with the broader ethnic imbalance in the Taliban state. **Northern and central provinces, Kabul, Balkh, Herat, Bamiyan, Badakhshan, Kunduz, Takhar, Parwan, Kapisa, have negligible or zero representation.** Only a few non-Pashtun figures (e.g., Nooruddin Azizi, Din Mohammad Hanif, Attaullah Omari) hold minor portfolios. No women, Hazaras, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Ismailis, Sikhs, Hindus, or Shia leaders are present in the cabinet at all.
- The dominance of Kandahari and southeastern Pashtun elites across security, finance, education,

ideology, justice, and extractive resources (e.g., Mines & Petroleum under Hidayatullah Badri of Kandahar) consolidates a political order that is both ethnically exclusionary and linguistically homogenizing.

- Analysts argue that the cabinet's composition is emblematic of the Taliban's ideological rigidity. An autocratic system built around southern Pashtun clerical authority, excluding technocrats, minorities, women, and regions that historically formed the backbone of Afghanistan's administrative and cultural life. Local voices echo the same concern. *"This government only represents one group... educated youth have fled... this is not a government for all Afghans."*
- The combination of linguistic repression, cabinet centralization in Kandahar, exclusion of northern/central provinces, and demographic manipulation in the north demonstrates a coherent pattern. The Taliban's governing logic is deliberately designed to entrench **Pashtun-Kandahari primacy** and diminish the political, cultural, and territorial standing of non-Pashtun communities.

7. The Kandahari–Haqqani Schism

The Taliban's internal power structure is divided between two dominant blocs that include the Kandahar core, led by Supreme Leader Haibatullah Akhundzada, and the Haqqani Network, an eastern faction centered in Loya Paktia (Khost–Paktia–Paktika). The Haqqanis, predating the Taliban movement, historically maintained parallel shuras, finances, and command networks, giving them semi-autonomous status that continues to challenge Kandahar's central control.

However, the landscape is now more fragmented than commonly perceived, with additional emerging power centers and commanders shaping competition for resources and authority.

- **Policy & Ideological Rift**
 - Akhundzada's Kandahar faction emphasizes strict religious centralism and isolationism, while the Haqqanis pursue pragmatic engagement, particularly through ties with the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and regional powerbrokering. Though Haibatullah issued a fatwa forbidding attacks inside Pakistan, it holds no weight in Haqqani-dominated eastern provinces, where TTP and Hafiz Gul Bahadur groups operate freely under Haqqani protection.
- **Haqqani Strategic Demands**
 - Reversal of the FATA merger with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, which will eventually ensure their influence over 7/8 tribal districts.
 - Resettlement of TTP militants back into the former tribal belt. These aims seek to build strategic depth inside Pakistan, secure leverage over Islamabad, and ensure the Haqqanis retain an external fallback base in case of intra-Taliban conflict.
- **Post-2025 Rift Escalation**
 - By early-2025, factional tensions surged. Intelligence leaks (notably Mullah Yaqoob's tip-off over Ayman al-Zawahiri) and disputes over border-crossing 18 revenues deepened mistrust. In addition, Akhundzada moved decisively to curb Haqqani influence:
 - Seized control of Pak-Afghan crossings and revenue collection from the Haqqanis.
 - Replaced Haqqani ministers with Kandahari deputies, while inserting Haqqani figures into Kandahari ministries to project "balance."
 - In March 2025, stripped Sirajuddin Haqqani of key Interior Ministry powers, shifting control to Deputy Ibrahim Sadr, and sidelined Defense Minister Mullah Yaqoob in favor of Qayyum Zakir, both Akhundzada loyalists.
- **March–April 2025: Consolidation and Coup Fears**
 - Amid rumors of a Haqqani-led coup, Akhundzada deployed special Kandahari units to Kabul and Loya Paktia, removing Haqqani-aligned officials, including Khost's police chief (brother of Nabi Omari). Sources described Sirajuddin Haqqani as in hiding, fearing assassination. The crackdown coincided with ICC warrant requests for Akhundzada and Chief Justice Abdul Hakim Haqqani, heightening paranoia within the movement.

o In April 2025, Akhundzada made a rare, symbolic visit to Paktia, Haqqani's home province, instructing officials to show "unconditional obedience" to Kandahar. This was interpreted as a direct challenge to Haqqani influence after his criticism of "exclusionary leadership" during a Kandahar council meeting.

● **October–November 2025: Border and Control Nexus**

o Following Pakistan's October precision strikes in Spin Boldak and Paktika, Akhundzada deployed special forces to secure border regions, particularly Paktika, ostensibly for defense but also to re-assert central control. While open fighting between the factions has not erupted, reports suggest Haqqani defiance persists, using TTP as a proxy to undermine Akhundzada's restraint on Pakistan operations.

10.1 Expanding Factionalism: Three-Way Divide Emerging

While traditionally viewed as a two-pole contest between Kandahar and Haqqanis, the Taliban now operate as a **multi-node power system** with competing networks.

The Kandahari Ideological Core (Haibatullah Bloc)

An ultra-conservative inner circle dominating decrees, religious legitimacy, and resource flows.

Key Actors:

- **Mullah Baradar** — long-time co-founder with his own influence network; educated in India, shaping his economic worldview and visible pro-India tilt in trade diversification debates.
- **Ibrahim Sadr** — Haibatullah's right hand in security matters, leaning toward Iran, especially visible in the pharmaceutical turf competition after Pakistan's medicine exports were halted.
- **Mullah Shireen** — Kandahar's governor, Haibatullah's trusted executor, controlling the **drug-smuggling economy**, historically one of the Taliban's largest revenue streams.
- **Muttaqi** — politically agile, **aligning himself with the strongest source of power and revenue**, long linked to Shireen's smuggling income; maintains property in Kohat and Quetta.

Resource Control:

Mines & minerals, historically managed by Shahabuddin Dilawar, have shifted deeper into Kandahari control through:

- **Gul Agha Ishakzai (Mullah Hidayatullah Badri)** — acting Minister of Mines & Petroleum (since July 2024), from Band-e-Temur, Kandahar; an Ishaqzai tribesman and childhood friend of Mullah Omar; known under multiple aliases (Mullah Gul Agha, Mullah Gul Agha Akhund, Hidayatullah, Haji Hidayatullah, Hayadatullah). This centralizes nearly all extractive-sector revenue in Kandahar's hands.

The Haqqani Network (Eastern bloc)

A pragmatic, regionally connected, and deeply entangled with TTP and cross-border militancy.

- **Sirajuddin Haqqani** — embattled, under pressure, but still commanding TTP, AQ ties, and Loya Paktia's militant infrastructure.
- **Anas Haqqani** — the diplomatic face, connected with UAE, Saudi Arabia, Russia; academically inclined, not war savvy.

Haqqanis, Refugee & Smuggling Networks:

- The Haqqanis historically controlled refugee rehab processes, border crossing points and the smuggling routes, recently under the patronage of Khalil Haqqani, which gave them political leverage and revenue.
- But after his assassination in 2024, resource flows have increasingly shifted to Kandahar, weakening Haqqanis financially and in with regard to power as well.

The Yaqoob Military Faction (Southern-central bloc)

Modernist, ambitious, and frustrated with both Haqqani duplicity and Haibatullah's rigidity; seeks

international recognition through moderated engagement.

But operationally:

- **Mullah Yaqoob is not war-savy**; commanders see him as symbolic rather than effective.
- His attempt to integrate TTP into the Taliban Army was rejected by Haqqanis.
- He faces challenges from stronger military actors, especially:
 - **Fasihuddin (Army Chief)**
A powerful, often overlooked node:
 - **From Badakhshan, ethnically Hazara**, commanding a network of northern-area commanders (Turkmen, Hazara, Badakhshi).
 - Credited with the **Panjshir conquest**, giving him major prestige and influence.
 - Controls large, battle-tested forces independent of Yaqoob, a quiet but potent counterweight to Kandahar and Haqqanis alike.

It is also note worthy that there is an emerging technocratic and second-tier elite, the NewGuard Kandaharis comprising of figures like Mullah Yaqoob, and Muttaqi's son (overseeing refugees and rehabilitation). These actors bridge ideology and administration, but lack the old guard's clout.

Proxy Politics: Dual Front Against Pakistan

Critically, both the Kandaharis and Haqqanis now sustain "proxies" against Pakistan:

Haqqanis - TTP

- Operational support: training, logistics, safehouses.
- Used as leverage against Pakistan and against Kandahar for their own political autonomy.

Kandaharis - BLA (Quiet Channels)

- The Kandaharis, in turn, maintain quiet ties with Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) cells, using them as counterweights to Haqqani influence and as a reciprocal deterrent against Pakistan's strikes on Afghan soil.

TTP as a Pivot

- Operationally tied to Haqqanis.
- Spiritually tied to Kandahar (allegiance to Haibatullah).

This duality makes TTP a pivot point in the Taliban's internal balance of power.

This evolving dynamic reflects a shift from ideological unity to strategic pluralism within the Taliban, where each faction pursues survival and dominance through controlled escalation.

On one hand, Haqqanis weaponize instability to retain influence, and on the other side, Kandaharis weaponize discipline and purges to preserve authority. Meanwhile, Yaqoob anchors his ambition in Mullah Umar's legacy to legitimize his path to succession.

If the trajectory continues, Afghanistan risks devolving into a hybrid emirate, fragmented between religious centralism, militant pragmatism, and military ambition.

For Pakistan, this translates into a multi-vector threat. Haqqani-backed insurgency from the west, BLA-linked agitation in Balochistan with Kandahari blessings, and a power vacuum that breeds more militant autonomy.

In essence, both factions have turned the border into leverage, not a frontier of peace, but a bargaining line drawn with proxies.

Strategic Implications

- The Kandahari–Haqqani rift, now layered with the Yaqoob and Fasihuddin poles, means there is no single, coherent decision centre in Kabul. Any understanding Pakistan reaches with one camp is vulnerable to slow-rolling or outright sabotage by another.
- Akhundzada’s centralization drive aims to erode Haqqani autonomy in Loya Paktia, long a hub for smuggling, TTP sanctuaries, and Al-Qaeda ties, **but this very pressure pushes Haqqanis to lean harder on external patrons and proxies (including TTP) to retain relevance and bargaining power.**
- Mullah Yaqoob’s failed attempt to integrate TTP into the Taliban Army, and Haqqani resistance to it, reflects **competing end-states**. One camp wants a more formalized, state-controlled security architecture; the other wants deniable, flexible proxies.
- Haqqani pragmatism versus Kandahar puritanism continues to paralyze governance; combined with economic collapse and diplomatic isolation, this **amplifies internal dissent and incentivizes each bloc to externalize pressure toward Pakistan** as a diversion and bargaining tool.
- **India’s selective re-entry compounds this dynamic.**
 - Haqqanis gain Indian media and diplomatic cover during crises.
 - Kandaharis can quietly use Delhi as a counterweight to Pakistan’s trade, visa, and recognition conditionality.
 - Baradar’s India-educated background reinforces pro-Delhi economic outreach and diversification narratives.
 - The proposed “Afghan–Hindu Research Center” offers India a soft-power and research footprint in Kabul, giving Taliban factions an additional external platform and narrative partner.
 - Delhi’s signalling around major Pakistan incidents (Delhi attack - Wana - Islamabad blast) tracks closely with Taliban-linked digital narratives, reinforcing the perception in Kabul that India is a viable political and information ally against Pakistan.
- As a result, **Pakistan’s traditional tools, transit leverage, border closures, selective strikes, and diplomatic isolation, have a reduced marginal impact** because each faction increasingly believes it can hedge via India, Iran, Gulf, or northern channels.
- Fragmentation and proxy dependence **raise the risk of deniable “runaway” actions.** High-impact attacks on Pakistani soil that can be blamed on rogue commanders or splinters, while the core factions still benefit from the coercive signal.

This evolving dynamic reflects a shift from ideological unity to strategic pluralism within the Taliban, where each faction pursues survival and dominance through controlled escalation.

On one hand, Haqqanis weaponize instability to retain influence, and on the other side, Kandaharis weaponize discipline and purges to preserve authority. Meanwhile, Yaqoob anchors his ambition in Mullah Umar’s legacy to legitimize his path to succession.

If the trajectory continues, Afghanistan risks devolving into a hybrid emirate, fragmented between religious centralism, militant pragmatism, and military ambition.

For Pakistan, this translates into a **multi-vector threat**. Haqqani-backed insurgency from the west, BLA-linked agitation in Balochistan with Kandahari blessings, and a power vacuum that breeds more militant autonomy.

In essence, both factions have turned the border into leverage, not a frontier of peace, but a bargaining line drawn with proxies, now reinforced by new external options created through India’s calibrated re-engagement.

8. Analysis

a. Strategic Reversal:

The Taliban's ideological rigidity and patronage of cross-border militancy have inverted Pakistan's four-decade Afghan doctrine. Kabul now represents not strategically friendly but a strategic liability, providing safe havens to actors directly attacking Pakistan.

b. Factional Power Politics:

The regime's internal geometry, Haibatullah's Kandaharis controlling decrees, Haqqanis controlling TTP/AQ/ITOs, Yaqoob controlling the army, prevents coherent governance. Both principal blocs employ anti-Pakistan leverage to balance internal power: Haqqanis through TTP militancy; Kandaharis through selective tolerance of BLA networks.

c. Diplomatic Exhaustion:

The collapse of the Doha 2.0 / Istanbul tracks signifies the formal end of structured engagement. Pakistan's conditionality approach (trade security) has reached 22 diminishing returns; international mediators (Qatar, Türkiye) acknowledge "irreconcilable positions."

d. Economic Humanitarian Spiral:

With poverty exceeding 90%, 2.4 million returnees, and almost no fiscal absorption or reintegration planning, Afghanistan's crisis is now structurally self-inflicted. Pakistan's controlled repatriation reduces its own security burden, but Kabul's failure to allocate resources, services, or governance capacity for its citizens has magnified instability. The humanitarian fallout, therefore, stems less from repatriation and more from the Emirate's refusal to invest in basic state functions, creating avoidable diplomatic, economic, and security spillovers across the region.

e. Information Warfare:

A full-spectrum narrative war now frames Pakistan as an oppressor and the Taliban as sovereign defenders. GDI's digital units (notably Directorate O5) exploit Pashto nationalism to sustain internal cohesion and external legitimacy.

f. India as Structuring Variable:

Delhi's calibrated re-entry supplies Kabul with political oxygen and information-ops muscle at critical negotiation nodes. The "Afghan-Hindu" footprint would convert softpower into policy leverage (fellows, data, agri pilots advisory access). Resultantly, Taliban factions' price in an India option, reduce compliance with Pakistan's red lines, and escalate proxy bargaining. The chain from Pakistan's strikes to Delhi incident narratives to Wana/Islamabad ops reads as synchronized signaling, not isolated shocks.

9. Policy Recommendations for Pakistan's Afghan Strategy (2025–2026)

1. Strategic Duality; "Measured Stick, Calibrated Carrot"

Adopt a felt pressure strategy that is precise, visible actions that communicate resolve without sliding into predictable escalation. Maintain punitive capability (strikes, closures, currency control) but only after exhausting diplomatic and public diplomacy options.

Rationale: Avoid normalizing kinetic response; keep deterrence credible yet unpredictable.

2. Economic Leverage and Dollar Discipline

Impose dollar-based port charges and settlement requirements on Afghan imports, limiting subsidized access through Karachi/Gwadar. Couple this with a managed PKR/Dirham settlement regime to curb dollar flight to Afghanistan.

Rationale: Convert economic leverage into a strategic tool while strengthening Pakistan's external account and signaling fiscal sovereignty.

3. Ideological and Academic Engagement Track (Soft Footprint)

Activate a "Religious and Scholarly Track" through Pakistan's seminaries, Council of Islamic Ideology, and Al-Azhar-aligned Ulema, particularly engaging scholars from Deobandi circles that Afghan clerics have historically studied under. Parallel Track II outreach through think tanks should host joint "Islamic Governance and Regional Peace Dialogues" with Afghan youth and seminary alumni to counter extremist

interpretations and rebuild normative trust.

Rationale: Taliban cadres are ideologically influenced, not diplomatically conditioned, religious engagement is Pakistan's only credible social influence channel. Afghan desks of Pakistani thinktanks, and public diplomacy platforms can function as Islamabad's soft-power nodes in Kabul, countering India's "Afghan-Hindu" academic footprint.

4. Multi-Track Diplomacy and Public Diplomacy Expansion

Institutionalize Track II and III mechanisms, think tanks, youth forums, academic exchanges, and media dialogues, to create parallel communication even during official breakdowns.

Rationale: Enables continuity of engagement, de-escalation, and message discipline beyond the FO-ISI pipeline.

5. Counter India's Strategic

Re-entry Expose and diplomatically challenge India's so-called "Afghan-Hindu Research Center" as dual-use influence infrastructure. Launch counter-initiatives, e.g., Pakistan-Afghanistan Research Fellowship Program under Afghan desks of Pakistani thinktanks and the Ministry of Education, offering Afghan scholars legitimate study and research alternatives in Pakistan.

Rationale: India is turning soft projects into strategic assets. Pakistan must preempt narrative and institutional capture through its own educational diplomacy.

6. Regional Counter-Terror Convergence (QUAD+)

Operationalize a Pakistan–China–Iran–Russia (QUAD+) platform for intelligence coordination and joint counter-ISKP monitoring.

Rationale: Neutralizes Indian leverage, aligns Pakistan with regional powers who share anti-ISKP and anti-TTP interests, and externalizes diplomatic pressure on Kabul.

7. Confidence-Building and Communication Controls

- Reopen humanitarian visa corridors under strict biometric control; selectively release low-risk Afghan detainees as confidence gestures.
- Reinstate Crisis Hotlines (ISI–GDI) for real-time communication during flare-ups.
- Ensure unified state communication; only designated authorities (MOFA/ISPR) issue official statements.

Rationale: Humanitarian signals lower tension; communication discipline prevents strategic messaging errors.

8. Diversified Ethnic Outreach

Pakistan should discreetly reconnect with Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara groups, including moderate NRF-linked figures, through educational, media, and humanitarian channels, not political alliances. Use Pakistani thinktanks, public diplomacy platforms and people-to-people organizations as neutral platforms for inclusive Afghan dialogues, signaling pluralism while keeping NRF engagement as quiet leverage to remind Kabul that exclusion breeds instability.

Why include p2p and religious outreach

Because Afghanistan's power is not just military, it's clerical. The Taliban's legitimacy flows through madrassa lineage, not ministries. Engaging that ecosystem through people-to-people initiatives, seminary linkages, and academic diplomacy allows Pakistan to influence ideological narratives where traditional diplomacy can't reach. It's soft leverage with long-term dividends.

