



TERRORISM, TRUST, AND TURMOIL: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF US-PAKISTAN COUNTER-TERRORISM COOPERATION

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Abstract:

This study critically examines the complications of US-Pakistan counterterrorism cooperation, focusing on the intricate balance between shared security objectives and the persistent trust deficits that have shaped this bilateral partnership. The analysis investigates the evolving nature of the bilateral relationship, highlighting important developments such as the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the resurgence of terrorist groups, and the impact of shifting geopolitical priorities on counterterrorism strategies. The study also explores the challenges that have strained cooperation, including allegations of Pakistan's selective counterterrorism efforts and US concerns over sovereignty issues, particularly regarding drone strikes. Through this lens, the paper provides insights into the successes, failures, and prospects of US-Pakistan collaboration in countering terrorism, emphasizing the need for renewed trust and diplomatic engagement to address emerging security threats in the region.

Keywords: US-Pakistan relations, Counterterrorism, trust deficits, Geopolitical Shifts



Introduction

The US-Pakistan relationship has evolved through complex dynamics marked by both cooperation and conflict. Historically, this bilateral relationship was driven by Cold War geopolitics. Pakistan became a crucial US ally in the 1950s, joining anti-communist pacts such as the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and Central Treaty Organization (CENTO). This alliance grew stronger during the Soviet-Afghan War in the 1980s, when the US and Pakistan collaborated extensively to support Afghan Mujahedeen fighters. This partnership laid the foundation for future security collaborations, but it also created friction, as Pakistan pursued its regional goals, particularly in Afghanistan and Kashmir (Jabeen & Mazhar, 2011).

The bilateral relationship experienced a shift following the end of the Cold War. The US sanctions were imposed on Pakistan in the 1990s due to its nuclear program, straining ties (Pandey, 2018). However, the 9/11 attacks led to a strategic realignment. Pakistan became a frontline state in the US-led War on Terror, receiving substantial military and financial aid in exchange for its counterterrorism efforts. Counterterrorism cooperation has since remained central to US-Pakistan relations, even as mistrust over Pakistan's alleged support for the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani Network has complicated matters (Sunawar, 2015).

Counterterrorism has been crucial in sustaining US-Pakistan ties, as both countries seek to combat terrorism, albeit with divergent priorities. The US has focused on dismantling global terrorist networks, such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), while Pakistan has dealt with internal insurgencies, especially the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Joint counterterrorism operations, intelligence sharing, and drone warfare have characterized their cooperation. However, the relationship has also been marked by tensions over sovereignty issues, especially related to US drone strikes in Pakistan's tribal areas. Despite these challenges, counterterrorism remains the cornerstone of US-Pakistan relations, influencing broader strategic and diplomatic engagements between the two nations (Mistry, 2020).

Against this backdrop, this research work seeks to address research questions such as: What causes the trust deficit in US-Pakistan counterterrorism cooperation? How does the US's inconsistent approach impact Pakistan's trust? How does Pakistan's political turmoil affect counterterrorism cooperation? What can the US and Pakistan do to rebuild trust and improve cooperation? This study uses a qualitative approach to examine Pakistan's foreign policy approach to the US on the chess of counterterrorism cooperation. It conducts a thorough review of existing literature, including books, articles, and research papers, to gain in-depth insights.

Conceptual Framework

Buck-passing" is a strategic behavior where states avoid confrontation with a rising threat by encouraging other states to shoulder the burden of balancing against the threat (Lind, 2004). Several scholars have discussed and contributed to the concept of buck-passing. This includes distinguished political scientist John Mearsheimer argues that that great powers often engage in buck-passing to maintain their power. He discusses how states, rather than directly confronting potential threats, prefer to encourage other states to check those threats. This behavior is especially prominent in multipolar systems where there are multiple great powers (Mearsheimer, 2001).



Walt's theory of "balance of threat" highlights how states form alliances to balance against perceived threats. While his primary focus is on balancing behavior, he also touches on buck-passing as a strategy where states avoid alliance commitments, allowing others to face the threat. Walt's work shows how buck-passing can lead to delayed or ineffective responses to threats (Walt, 1990).

Moreover, Kennedy explores the strategic behaviors of great powers throughout history. His analysis of European power dynamics, particularly during the World Wars, highlights buck-passing as a common strategy. Great powers often allowed others to deal with rising threats, such as Nazi Germany, which contributed to delayed action and escalation (Kennedy, 1989). Schweller focuses on why states fail to balance threats and emphasizes how domestic politics and ideational factors influence buck-passing behavior. He argues that states sometimes pass the buck not just out of strategic calculation but also due to internal political constraints and misperceptions of threats (Schweller, 2010).

In the context of US-Pakistan relations, buck-passing has been a persistent issue, hindering effective cooperation and fueling tensions between the two nations. Both countries have engaged in a blame game, shifting responsibility, and evading accountability for their actions or inactions in the fight against terrorism. The US has criticized Pakistan for not doing enough to combat terrorist groups, while Pakistan has argued that the US should take more responsibility for addressing the root causes of terrorism. This lack of accountability and coordination has allowed terrorist groups to continue operating in the region, perpetuating a cycle of violence and mistrust.

The consequences of buck-passing in US-Pakistan cooperation are far-reaching, undermining the effectiveness of counterterrorism efforts and straining bilateral relations. To overcome this challenge, it is essential to establish clearer lines of accountability and coordination, ensuring that both countries take ownership of their responsibilities in the fight against terrorism. By recognizing the tendency of buck-passing and addressing its root causes, policymakers can work towards building trust and improving cooperation, ultimately leading to a more effective and sustainable counterterrorism strategy (Banerjee & Commuri, 2014).

Historical Context of US-Pakistan Counterterrorism Cooperation

The US-Pakistan counterterrorism cooperation has a complex and evolving history, spanning multiple decades. During the Cold War era, the US and Pakistan allied in the 1980s to counter Soviet influence in the region, particularly during the Soviet-Afghan war. Pakistan played a crucial role in supporting the Afghan Mujahedeen, and the US provided significant financial and military aid to Pakistan. This cooperation was largely driven by mutual strategic interests, with Pakistan serving as a key proxy for the US in the region.

Following the 9/11 attacks, the US-Pakistan relationship underwent a significant shift. Pakistan was designated as a frontline state in the War on Terror, and the US relied heavily on Pakistan's military and intelligence capabilities to target al-Qaeda and Taliban operatives. However, this cooperation was marked by tensions and mistrust, particularly with the rise of drone warfare. The US began conducting drone strikes in Pakistan's tribal regions, targeting terrorist leaders but also resulting in civilian casualties. Pakistan publicly condemned these strikes, citing



sovereignty concerns, while privately cooperating with the US on select operations (Ali & Anwar, 2023).

This complex dynamic has continued to shape US-Pakistan counterterrorism cooperation, with periods of heightened tension and cooperation. For example, the 2011 raid that killed Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad, Pakistan, highlighted the strained relationship, as Pakistan was not informed of the operation beforehand (Rollins, 2011). Conversely, the US and Pakistan have collaborated on joint operations, such as the 2014 North Waziristan military offensive. Moreover, launched in 2004, US drone strikes in Pakistan have had devastating consequences, sparking widespread controversy and outrage (Siddiqi, 2011). According to the Bureau of Investigative Journalism (BIJ), between 2004 and 2018, the US conducted over 430 drone strikes in Pakistan, resulting in up to 2,200 civilian casualties, including 400 children.

These strikes have not only caused immense human suffering but also fueled anti-American sentiment, with 80% of Pakistanis viewing the US as an enemy (Pew Research Center, 2012). The strikes have also been criticized for their lack of transparency and accountability, with the US rarely acknowledging or investigating civilian casualties. For instance, the 2011 Datta Khel drone strike killed 42 civilians, including tribal elders, sparking widespread condemnation. Such incidents have strained US-Pakistan relations and hindered cooperation on counterterrorism efforts, ultimately undermining regional stability and security. Throughout, the nature of cooperation has been marked by a subtle balance of mutual interests, mistrust, and competing priorities (Bursztyn et al., 2020).

US and Pakistan's Diverging Counterterrorism Agendas

The United States and Pakistan have distinct priorities and goals in their efforts to combat terrorism, resulting in divergent counterterrorism agendas. The US prioritizes the disruption of global jihadist networks, including Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and ISIS, which are seen as a significant threat to international security and stability. Additionally, the US focuses on ensuring international security by preventing terrorist attacks on Western soil and protecting global interests. A stable Afghan government is also a key objective, as it would prevent the country from becoming a haven for terrorist organizations (Nawab et al., 2023).

To achieve these goals, the US has relied heavily on drone strikes in Pakistan's tribal regions. These strikes aim to dismantle terrorist infrastructure, including training camps, hideouts, and supply chains, thereby disrupting their ability to plan and execute attacks. Furthermore, the US seeks to eliminate high-value targets, such as key leaders and operatives, to weaken terrorist organizations and limit their effectiveness. This approach reflects the US's broader counterterrorism strategy, which emphasizes the use of military force and intelligence gathering to disrupt and defeat terrorist networks. However, this approach has led to tensions with Pakistan, which has its distinct priorities and concerns in the region (Johnston & Sarbahi, 2016).

In contrast, Pakistan's counterterrorism agenda is driven by a unique set of regional security concerns, primarily centered on its longstanding rivalry with India. Unlike the US, which focuses on global jihadist networks, Pakistan must balance its counterterrorism efforts with the need to maintain an inclusive military presence along its eastern border, where tensions with India remain



high. This delicate balancing act is further complicated by Pakistan's internal terrorism threats, including the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and sectarian violence, which have caused immense human suffering and instability. For instance, the tragic Army Public School (APS) attack in Peshawar in 2014, which resulted in the death of over 150 people, highlighted the persistent threat of terrorism. Additionally, sectarian violence also remained a critical issue, with Sunni-Shia conflicts occasionally erupting into deadly confrontations in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province of Pakistan (Imran & Mustafa, 2019)

The devastating impact of these threats is evident in the statistics, with over 60,000 Pakistanis killed or injured in terrorist attacks since 2003, according to the South Asia Terrorism Portal. As a result, Pakistan's counterterrorism strategy remained multifaceted, seeking to address both domestic and regional security challenges while navigating complex relationships with international partners, including the US. This approach required a careful calibration of military, diplomatic, and intelligence efforts to mitigate the threat of terrorism while avoiding escalation with India and maintaining regional stability (Mahmood & Jetter, 2023).

Important Developments in US-Pakistan Counterterrorism Cooperation

In the post-2013 period, US-Pakistan counterterrorism cooperation has been marked by deteriorating relations and significant challenges. One key factor has been the reduction of US troops in Afghanistan, which has had far-reaching implications for Pakistan. As the US drew down its forces during President Obama's administration, Pakistan faced a new reality, with increased instability and security threats emanating from its western border. This shift has forced Pakistan to recalibrate its security priorities and strategies, often leading to differing priorities with the US (Akhtar et al., 2021).

Meanwhile, the rise of new security threats has further complicated the counterterrorism landscape. The emergence of ISIS-K (Islamic State Khorasan) and the resurgence of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) have posed significant challenges to both the US and Pakistan. These groups have exploited the security vacuum in Afghanistan and Pakistan, launching devastating attacks and destabilizing the region. The TTP, in particular, has targeted Pakistani civilians and security forces, causing widespread harm and undermining Pakistan's internal security. As these new threats have emerged, the US and Pakistan have struggled to find common ground, with differing approaches and priorities hindering effective cooperation (Ahmad, 2010).

Two important incidents in 2011 significantly impacted US-Pakistan relations, eroding trust and cooperation between the two nations. The first incident was the US operation that resulted in the death of Osama bin Laden on May 2, 2011. The raid, conducted by US Navy SEALs in Abbottabad, Pakistan, was carried out without prior notification to Pakistani authorities, leading to widespread outrage and hurt national pride. Pakistan felt violated and humiliated, perceiving the raid as a breach of its sovereignty. The incident severely damaged trust between the two countries, with Pakistan questioning the US's respect for its territorial integrity.

The second incident occurred on November 26, 2011, when US-led NATO forces mistakenly attacked a Pakistani military outpost in Salala, killing 24 soldiers. Pakistan responded by closing NATO supply routes into Afghanistan, crippling the US-led coalition's logistical



capabilities. The Salala incident further strained relations, with Pakistan demanding an apology and guarantees against future incidents. The US eventually apologized after seven months at the Bonn Conference, but the damage to trust and cooperation had already been done. These two incidents in 2011 marked a turning point in US-Pakistan relations, highlighting deep-seated tensions and mistrust. The aftermath saw a significant decline in cooperation on counterterrorism efforts, with Pakistan adopting a more assertive stance on its sovereignty and security interests (Roy et al., 2022).

Similarly, egregious drone strikes by the US in Pakistan have sparked intense debate and outrage, centering on issues of sovereignty, legality, and civilian casualties. Pakistan has long contested the strikes, arguing they violate its territorial sovereignty and flout international law. The US, however, maintains that the strikes are necessary to combat terrorism and protect its interests. This fundamental disagreement has fueled tensions between the two nations.

Moreover, the drone strikes have resulted in significant civilian casualties, with estimates suggesting hundreds of non-combatants have been killed or injured. This has galvanized domestic opposition in Pakistan, with many viewing the strikes as a breach of human rights and international law. Protests and condemnation from Pakistani politicians, civil society, and the general public have been widespread, further straining US-Pakistan relations.

The civilian toll has also raised questions about the effectiveness and precision of drone strikes. Critics argue that the strikes often miss their intended targets, instead killing innocent bystanders and fueling anti-American sentiment. This has created a cycle of violence, where drone strikes spark retaliation and recruitment by militant groups, undermining regional stability and security. As a result, Pakistan has demanded an end to the strikes, seeking alternative solutions to address shared counterterrorism concerns (Plaw, 2011).

Challenges to Effective Cooperation

1. The trust deficit between the US and Pakistan poses a significant challenge to effective cooperation on counterterrorism efforts. At the heart of this mistrust are allegations that Pakistan engages in a "double game" with Taliban factions, where it publicly condemns the Taliban while secretly maintaining ties with certain groups, such as the Haqqani Network. The US views this perceived duplicity as a major obstacle to cooperation, as it suggests that Pakistan is not fully committed to combating terrorism (Rath, 2011).
2. The US is skeptical of Pakistan's selective counterterrorism operations, where it appears to target only certain terrorist groups while turning a blind eye to others. This selectivity has led the US to question Pakistan's true intentions and commitment to counterterrorism. The US believes that Pakistan's military and intelligence agencies often prioritize domestic security concerns and strategic interests over shared counterterrorism goals, leading to a divergence in priorities and a lack of meaningful cooperation (Tankel, 2018).
3. These suspicions have been fueled by Pakistan's historical support for militant groups, such as Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed, which have attacked Indian targets. While Pakistan denies current involvement with these groups, the US remains unconvinced. The trust deficit has also been exacerbated by a lack of meaningful intelligence sharing from



Pakistan, particularly regarding Taliban and Al-Qaeda operatives. As a result, the US and Pakistan struggle to find common ground on counterterrorism efforts, with the trust deficit remaining a major hurdle to effective cooperation (Jabeen, 2009).

4. The US and Pakistan have diverging regional priorities, which hinders effective cooperation on counterterrorism efforts. The US has traditionally focused on Afghanistan, viewing it as a critical front in the global war on terror. In contrast, Pakistan's regional priorities are more sovereignty-centric, with a focus on balancing its relationships with neighboring powers India and China. Pakistan's strategic calculus is driven by its desire to maintain a delicate balance of power in the region, rather than solely focusing on counterterrorism (Khawaja, 2019).
5. Furthermore, Pakistan's engagement with the Afghan Taliban and Haqqani network reflects its complex geopolitical landscape and efforts to maintain regional stability. While the US views these groups as terrorist organizations, Pakistan has sought to maintain relationships with them as part of its broader strategy to secure its western border and promote regional balance. Pakistan's military and intelligence agencies believe that these connections can be leveraged to positively influence developments in Afghanistan and protect national interests. However, differences in approach have led to misunderstandings and tensions with the US, which seeks to defeat these groups. Pakistan hopes to find common ground with the US, addressing shared concerns while respecting its national security priorities (Ali & Holland, 2022).
6. Pakistan's regional priorities are also shaped by its rivalry with India, with which it has a longstanding dispute over Kashmir. Pakistan's support for pro-autonomy groups in Kashmir has been a major point of contention with the US, which views these groups as terrorist organizations. Meanwhile, Pakistan's growing relationship with China has also led to diverging priorities, as the US seeks to counter Chinese influence in the region. These competing regional priorities have created a complex web of interests and alliances, making it challenging for the US and Pakistan to cooperate effectively on counterterrorism efforts (Cohen, 2013).
7. Pakistan's domestic political instability has significantly impacted its counterterrorism policies, leading to inconsistent and unpredictable approaches to addressing terrorism. The country's political landscape has been marked by frequent changes in government, military coups, and power struggles between civilian and military leaders. These changes have resulted in shifting priorities and policies, hindering the development of a cohesive and effective counterterrorism strategy. For instance, during the 2013 general elections, the incoming government's promise to negotiate with the Taliban was seen as a significant shift in policy, only to be later contradicted by military actions against the group. Such inconsistencies have undermined trust with international partners and hindered progress in the fight against terrorism (Hussain et al., 2014).
8. The struggle for control over foreign policy decisions between military and civilian leaders has been a major factor in this instability. Pakistan's military has historically wielded significant influence over foreign policy, particularly with regard to national security and



counterterrorism. However, civilian governments have sought to assert their authority, leading to tensions and conflicts over decision-making. When civilian governments are in power, they often prioritize political and diplomatic approaches to counterterrorism, engaging in negotiations with militant groups and seeking international cooperation. In contrast, military-led governments tend to favor a more aggressive, kinetic approach, relying on military force to combat terrorism (Janjua, 2021).

These changes in approach have created confusion and uncertainty, allowing militant groups to exploit the gaps and inconsistencies in Pakistan's counterterrorism policies. The lack of a unified and consistent strategy has also hindered international cooperation, as foreign partners are unsure of who to engage with and what policies will be in place from one day to the next. Furthermore, Pakistan's domestic political instability has led to a lack of accountability and oversight, enabling corrupt and extremist elements to infiltrate government institutions and undermine counterterrorism efforts. The resulting instability has made it challenging for Pakistan to effectively address the root causes of terrorism, perpetuating a cycle of violence and extremism.

Evolution of US-Pakistan Counterterrorism Cooperation: A Comparative Analysis of Obama, Trump, and Biden Administrations

During the Obama administration, US foreign policy towards Pakistan underwent a significant recalibration. The US sought to balance its counterterrorism objectives with a more subtle approach, recognizing Pakistan's complexities and sensitivities. Drone strikes remained a contentious issue, with the US continuing to conduct strikes against terrorist targets in Pakistan's tribal regions. During the Obama administration, the United States provided Pakistan with significant aid, including \$5 billion in civilian assistance and over \$1 billion in emergency humanitarian response. Additionally, the U.S. committed \$250 million to assist in the relief, recovery, and rehabilitation of the FATA region (Mehrish, 2012). Despite these efforts, tensions persisted over nuclear security and concerns about Pakistan's commitment to fighting terrorism. The US expressed concerns about the safety and security of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal, fearing that it could fall into the wrong hands. Additionally, the US questioned Pakistan's willingness to confront all terrorist groups, particularly those like the Haqqani Network, which were seen as assets by Pakistan's military.

The Obama administration's approach was marked by a mix of cooperation and criticism. While the US continued to provide significant military aid to Pakistan, it also publicly expressed frustration with Pakistan's perceived lack of progress in combating terrorism. This subtle approach reflected the US's recognition of Pakistan's importance in regional security, while also acknowledging the challenges and limitations of the bilateral relationship. In the subsequent years (2017-2022), the US-Pakistan relationship continued to evolve, with the Trump and Biden administrations maintaining a focus on counterterrorism and nuclear security. However, the relationship remained complex and often contentious, with tensions flaring over issues like Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan's human rights record (Jaffrelot, 2016).

During his presidency, Donald Trump adopted a "Do More" approach towards Pakistan, demanding that the country take decisive action against the Afghan Taliban and other terrorist



groups. This approach was marked by a suspension of US security aid to Pakistan, with the Trump administration withholding over \$1 billion in military assistance. The move was intended to pressure Pakistan into taking more inclusive action against terrorist groups, particularly the Haqqani Network, which was seen as a key facilitator of the Taliban's insurgency in Afghanistan. Trump's approach also involved a strategic realignment with India, which had significant implications for Pakistan. The US and India strengthened their defense ties, with the US designating India as a "Major Defense Partner" and signing key defense agreements (Kaura & Era, 2017).

This realignment was perceived by Pakistan as a threat to its regional security and led to increased tensions between Pakistan and India. Pakistan felt that the US was neglecting its long-standing alliance with Islamabad and instead siding with its arch-rival, New Delhi. The "do more" approach and the suspension of aid created significant tensions in the US-Pakistan relationship, with Pakistan pushing back against what it saw as unrealistic demands and a lack of understanding of its regional security concerns. The approach ultimately yielded limited results, with Pakistan taking some steps against terrorist groups but also maintaining its long-standing ties with certain groups. The strategic realignment with India also had lasting implications for the region, contributing to increased competition and tensions between Pakistan and India (Holland, 2018).

The Biden administration's approach to Pakistan has been shaped by the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, marking a significant shift in the regional dynamics. With the end of the US's two-decade-long military presence in Afghanistan, the Biden administration has recalibrated its counterterrorism efforts, recognizing that the terrorist threat has evolved and become more transnational. In this context, the US has sought to reorient its relationship with Pakistan, moving beyond the singular focus on Afghanistan and exploring ways to cooperate on a broader range of issues.

As the US navigates this new geopolitical landscape, its relations with Pakistan are likely to undergo a significant transformation. The Biden administration has acknowledged Pakistan's importance in regional security and has expressed a desire to strengthen economic and diplomatic ties. However, the relationship will also be shaped by emerging global trends, including the rise of China and the growing competition between the US and China in the Indo-Pacific region. Pakistan's strategic calculus, including its relationships with China and Russia, will also influence the trajectory of US-Pakistan relations (Akhtar & Holland, 2023).

In this changing environment, the US and Pakistan will need to find common ground on issues like counterterrorism, non-proliferation, and regional stability. The US will likely seek to leverage its relationship with Pakistan to advance its broader regional goals, including promoting stability in Afghanistan and countering Chinese influence. Meanwhile, Pakistan will aim to maintain its strategic autonomy while capitalizing on its relationships with multiple global powers to advance its interests. As the US and Pakistan navigate this complex landscape, their relationship will likely be marked by both cooperation and competition (Jahangir & Khan, 2020).

Impact on Regional and Global Security

The US-Pakistan cooperation in combating terrorism has had a significant impact on



regional and global security. On the one hand, the partnership has achieved notable successes in dismantling terrorist networks, particularly in the early 2000s. Joint intelligence sharing and military operations led to the capture or elimination of high-profile terrorist leaders, including Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, Mullah Omer, and Osama bin Laden. Additionally, the cooperation helped to disrupt Al-Qaeda's operational capabilities and weakened its ability to launch attacks on Western targets. However, despite these successes, the partnership has also faced significant failures. The US has repeatedly expressed frustration with Pakistan's perceived lack of action against certain terrorist groups, such as the Haqqani Network and Lashkar-e-Taiba, which have continued to operate with relative impunity. Moreover, the US drone program in Pakistan has been a source of tension, with many Pakistanis viewing it as a violation of their country's sovereignty. The program has also been criticized for causing civilian casualties and fueling anti-American sentiment (Yousaf et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the cooperation has been hindered by mutual mistrust and differing priorities. The US has prioritized counterterrorism efforts in Afghanistan, while Pakistan has focused on its own domestic security concerns and regional rivalries with India. This divergence in priorities has led to periodic breakdowns in cooperation, including the suspension of US aid to Pakistan in 2018. In terms of intelligence sharing, the US and Pakistan have cooperated on specific operations, but the relationship has been marked by mistrust and limitations. Pakistan has been reluctant to share intelligence on certain groups, fearing that the US would use the information to target Pakistani interests. Similarly, the US has been hesitant to share sensitive intelligence with Pakistan, given concerns about the country's history of leaking information to terrorist groups (Amin & Nasir, 2018).

Moreover, Pakistan has played a significant role in Afghanistan's security landscape, particularly in the context of the Taliban's rise to power. Historically, Pakistan has maintained ties with various Taliban factions, providing them with safe havens, logistical support, and ideological guidance. This influence has been a double-edged sword, as Pakistan has used its leverage to shape the Taliban's agenda while also facing criticism for enabling their activities. Following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, Pakistan's influence over Taliban factions has become even more pronounced. Pakistan has been accused of backing the Haqqani Network, a powerful Taliban faction, and providing them with military support and strategic guidance. This has allowed the Taliban to consolidate power and pose a significant challenge to regional security (Shah & Majeed, 2019).

The impact of Pakistan's role in Afghanistan's security landscape has been far-reaching, particularly with regard to Indo-Pak relations. India has long viewed Pakistan's support for the Taliban as a threat to its national security, given the Taliban's historical ties to anti-Indian militant groups. The Taliban's return to power has heightened these concerns, with India accusing Pakistan of using the Taliban as a proxy force to undermine Indian interests in Afghanistan. Furthermore, Pakistan's influence over the Taliban has also complicated regional efforts to stabilize Afghanistan. The Taliban's refusal to form an inclusive government and their human rights abuses have raised concerns among regional actors, including China and Russia. Pakistan's continued support for the Taliban has limited the scope for regional cooperation in Afghanistan, as countries are wary of



Pakistan's intentions and fear being drawn into its proxy conflicts (Hilali, 2017).

To conclude, Pakistan's role in Afghanistan's security landscape has significant implications for regional security, particularly Indo-Pak relations. While Pakistan's influence over the Taliban has allowed it to shape the trajectory of the conflict, it has also created tensions with neighboring countries and limited the scope for regional cooperation. As the situation in Afghanistan continues to evolve, Pakistan's actions will be closely watched, and its relationships with regional actors will be critical in determining the future of Afghan stability.

Future of US-Pakistan Counterterrorism Cooperation

The future of US-Pakistan counterterrorism cooperation post-Afghanistan withdrawal is marked by shifting dynamics and strategic goals. Before 2021, the US-Pakistan relationship was heavily focused on cooperation in Afghanistan, with the US relying on Pakistan for logistical support, intelligence sharing, and military operations against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. However, with the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, both countries' strategic goals have undergone a significant shift. The US has increasingly prioritized great power competition with China and Russia, while also focusing on global terrorism threats, including ISIS (Ahmed et al., 2023). In contrast, Pakistan has sought to maintain its strategic autonomy, cultivating relationships with multiple global powers, including China and Russia, while also addressing its domestic security concerns.

Despite these shifts, prospects for cooperation on broader security issues remain. The US and Pakistan share a common interest in combating global terrorism, particularly ISIS, which has a presence in the region. The two countries have cooperated on counterterrorism operations in the past and can build on this foundation to address emerging threats. Moreover, Pakistan's experience in combating terrorism on its soil has given it valuable expertise, which can be leveraged to address global terrorism challenges. The US can benefit from Pakistan's insights and cooperation in areas such as counter-radicalization, intelligence sharing, and border security.

However, cooperation will require navigating complex issues, including Pakistan's relationships with certain terrorist groups and US concerns about Pakistan's nuclear program. Trust-building measures, such as increased transparency and dialogue, will be essential to overcome these challenges. Hence, while the US-Pakistan relationship has undergone significant changes post-2021, cooperation on broader security issues remains a possibility. By leveraging their shared interests in combating global terrorism and building trust, the two countries can navigate their differences and work towards a more stable and secure region (Shahbaz, 2023).

The regional alliances in South Asia are undergoing significant changes, with growing Pakistan-China relations being a key factor. China's increasing influence in the region has implications for US influence and counterterrorism strategies. Pakistan's deepening ties with China are evident in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a massive infrastructure project worth over \$60 billion. This partnership has strengthened Pakistan's economy and provided China with a strategic foothold in the region. The growing Pakistan-China axis has implications for US influence in the region. Historically, the US has been a key player in South Asian geopolitics, but China's rise has challenged this dominance. The US has expressed concerns about China's



expanding military presence in the region, including its naval base in Gwadar, Pakistan. Moreover, China's support for Pakistan's stance on Kashmir has further complicated US-Pakistan relations (Ganguly & Paul Kapur, 2023).

Regional dynamics significantly shape counterterrorism strategies. For instance, Pakistan's relationships with certain terrorist groups, such as the Haqqani Network, are influenced by its rivalry with India. Similarly, China's counterterrorism concerns, particularly in Xinjiang, have led it to support Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts. However, this support has also been criticized for being selective and focused on groups that threaten Chinese interests. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a regional security bloc led by China and Russia, has also become a key player in regional counterterrorism efforts. The SCO's counterterrorism initiatives have been seen as a rival to US-led efforts, highlighting the complex and competitive nature of regional security dynamics (Khan et al., 2023).

Hence, the growing Pakistan-China relations and the evolving regional dynamics have significant implications for US influence and counterterrorism strategies in South Asia. As China's presence in the region continues to expand, the US will need to adapt its approach to address these new realities and find ways to cooperate with regional actors to address shared counterterrorism concerns. Building trust between the US and Pakistan is crucial for effective counterterrorism cooperation. To achieve this, diplomacy should be prioritized, with regular high-level engagements and open communication channels. Confidence-building measures, such as joint military exercises and training programs, can also help foster a sense of mutual trust and cooperation. Transparency in counterterrorism efforts is also essential. Both countries should share intelligence and best practices, and work together to develop a shared understanding of the terrorist threat. This can be achieved through regular joint assessments and strategy sessions.

Multilateral cooperation is also vital in building trust and enhancing counterterrorism efforts. The US and Pakistan should work together through international organizations such as the UN and regional organizations like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). This can help build a regional consensus on counterterrorism and facilitate cooperation among multiple stakeholders. Furthermore, the US and Pakistan should also engage in people-to-people diplomacy, educational exchanges, and cultural programs to promote mutual understanding and trust. By building bridges between the two nations, we can create a stronger foundation for cooperation on counterterrorism and other issues.

In addition, the US should also consider providing economic assistance and development aid to Pakistan, to help address the root causes of extremism and terrorism. This can include support for education, healthcare, and economic development programs, which can help reduce poverty and inequality and promote stability and security in the region. By taking these steps, the US and Pakistan can build trust, enhance cooperation, and make progress in the fight against terrorism (Ullah et al., 2023).

Conclusion

The US-Pakistan counter-terrorism cooperation post-2013 has been marked by turmoil, mistrust, and inconsistent progress. Despite shared goals, the relationship has been plagued by



divergent priorities, a lack of transparency, and mutual suspicion. The US has struggled to reconcile its desire for Pakistani cooperation with concerns over Pakistan's support for certain terrorist groups. Pakistan, meanwhile, has navigated its complex security landscape, balancing its relationships with multiple global powers while addressing domestic security concerns. The rise of China as a regional player has further complicated the dynamics, with the US and Pakistan vying for influence. Throughout this tumultuous period, counter-terrorism efforts have suffered, with both sides accusing each other of inadequate commitment. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan has added new layers of complexity, as Pakistan's influence over the Taliban has grown. To move forward, it is essential to acknowledge the deep-seated trust deficits and work towards rebuilding confidence. Diplomacy, transparency, and multilateral cooperation are critical components of a revitalized partnership. The US and Pakistan must also address the root causes of extremism and terrorism, including poverty, inequality, and political instability. Ultimately, a stable and secure South Asia requires a collaborative approach to counter-terrorism, one that balances competing interests and priorities. By confronting the challenges head-on and working towards a more trusting and transparent partnership, the US and Pakistan can make meaningful progress in the fight against terrorism and promote regional stability.



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