ISSN Online: 3006-4708
ISSN Print: 3006-4694

SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW ARCHIVES

https://policyjournalofms.com

The Impact of External Actors on Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations: an Analysis of Nato Intervention and India's Strategic Presence in Afghanistan"

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.70670/sra.v3i1.2593

Abstract

Afghanistan has remained a major arena of international and regional competition due to its strategic location between South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East. The involvement of external actors, particularly NATO forces after 2001 and regional powers including India, significantly influenced Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. This paper examines how foreign intervention and regional strategic competition affected bilateral relations between Islamabad and Kabul. The study uses a qualitative historical research approach based on primary and secondary sources. The analysis demonstrates that NATO intervention transformed Afghanistan's security environment, altered Pakistan's strategic calculations, and intensified mutual mistrust between Pakistan and Afghanistan. The study concludes that external involvement, combined with existing historical disputes, contributed to diplomatic challenges and security tensions between the two neighboring states.

Keywords: NATO, Afghanistan, Pakistan, External Actors, War on Terror, Regional Security

Introduction

Afghanistan's strategic position has historically attracted the attention of international and regional powers. Located between Central Asia and South Asia, Afghanistan has served as a connecting point for political, economic, and security interests. Pakistan and Afghanistan, despite geographical proximity and cultural similarities, have experienced complicated relations due to historical disputes and changing geopolitical circumstances. The involvement of external actors has further influenced the nature of their bilateral relationship. The Cold War transformed Afghanistan into a centre of rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979 created significant security challenges for Pakistan because of its geographical proximity and political interests. Pakistan became a major supporter of Afghan resistance groups and worked with international partners against Soviet expansion. (Ahmad, 2011) Pakistan-Afghanistan relations have remained a significant component of South Asian geopolitics due to their shared border, historical connections, cultural similarities, and strategic importance. The relationship between the two neighbouring states has experienced periods of cooperation as well as tension, influenced by security concerns, political developments, border disputes, and the involvement of external powers. Afghanistan's geographical position between South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East has made it a strategically important region where both neighbouring and global actors have pursued their interests. Consequently, Pakistan-Afghanistan relations cannot be examined only through bilateral interactions; they must also be understood within the broader framework of international involvement

and regional power competition (Rashid, 2012). Since the Cold War period, Afghanistan has remained vulnerable to external intervention due to its strategic location and internal political instability. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, followed by the civil war and the emergence of the Taliban movement, transformed Afghanistan into a major arena of international competition. External actors influenced Afghanistan's political structures, security environment, and foreign relations, which directly affected Pakistan's strategic calculations. Pakistan's geographical proximity and security interests made developments in Afghanistan highly significant for its foreign policy and national security objectives (Rubin, 2013). The NATO intervention in Afghanistan after the September 11, 2001 attacks represented one of the most important external influences on Afghanistan's political and security environment. The United States and NATO initiated military operations under the framework of counterterrorism, aimed at eliminating Al-Qaeda networks and removing the Taliban government. The intervention resulted in the establishment of a new Afghan political order and introduced international efforts toward state-building, security sector reform, and economic reconstruction (Dorronsoro, 2009). However, the prolonged NATO presence also created complex challenges for Pakistan, including border insecurity, refugee pressures, militancy concerns, and diplomatic tensions with Western countries (Fair, 2014). Pakistan initially supported the international campaign against terrorism and cooperated with NATO-led operations; however, its relationship with the Western alliance became increasingly complicated. Scholars argue that Pakistan faced a strategic dilemma because it had to balance cooperation with NATO while managing domestic security challenges and maintaining influence in Afghanistan (Grare, 2006). The expansion of NATO military operations near Pakistan's western border increased Islamabad's concerns regarding sovereignty, security threats, and the changing regional balance of power (Haqqani, 2013). The NATO intervention also affected Pakistan-Afghanistan relations by influencing Afghan political structures and security dynamics. The establishment of a Western-backed Afghan government increased Afghanistan's dependence on international assistance and altered traditional regional power relationships. Pakistan expressed concerns regarding India's growing influence in Afghanistan after 2001, while Afghanistan developed closer relations with India through diplomatic cooperation and development assistance (Pant, 2010). These developments contributed to Pakistan's perception that external involvement in Afghanistan was reshaping regional strategic realities against its interests. India's strategic presence in Afghanistan became another significant external factor affecting Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. After 2001, India expanded its engagement through economic assistance, infrastructure projects, diplomatic initiatives, and institutional support. India invested in Afghanistan's reconstruction by supporting projects such as the Afghan Parliament building, the Zaranj-Delaram Highway, education programs, and healthcare initiatives (Kugelman, 2012). Although India presented its Afghan policy as development-oriented, Pakistan viewed increasing Indian influence in Afghanistan through a security perspective. From a Pakistani strategic viewpoint, India's involvement in Afghanistan raised concerns about strategic encirclement and regional competition. Pakistan has historically considered Afghanistan important for its national security due to geographical proximity, border issues, and concerns regarding hostile external influence. Therefore, India's growing political and economic presence in Afghanistan was often interpreted by Pakistani policymakers as a challenge to Pakistan's traditional strategic interests (Fair, 2014). This perception contributed to mistrust between Pakistan and Afghanistan, particularly when Afghan governments developed stronger relations with New Delhi. The impact of external actors on Pakistan-Afghanistan relations can be analysed through the framework of Neorealism (Structural Realism). Neorealism argues that states operate within an anarchic international system where no central authority guarantees security, forcing states to seek power and strategic advantages to ensure survival (Waltz, 1979). From this perspective, NATO's intervention and India's engagement in Afghanistan influenced regional power calculations by altering the distribution of influence and

creating new security concerns for Pakistan. The involvement of NATO and India demonstrates how Afghanistan became a space where global and regional powers pursued strategic objectives. NATO sought to address terrorism and establish regional security, while India aimed to expand diplomatic influence and promote connectivity. At the same time, Pakistan attempted to protect its security interests and maintain its regional relevance. These competing objectives shaped the dynamics of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations and contributed to changing patterns of cooperation and conflict (Dalrymple, 2013). Therefore, this study examines the impact of external actors on Pakistan-Afghanistan relations by analysing two major factors: NATO intervention and India's strategic presence in Afghanistan. It explores how international military involvement and regional strategic competition influenced political relations, security perceptions, and geopolitical dynamics between Pakistan and Afghanistan. By applying a Neorealist perspective, the study aims to understand how external actors transformed Afghanistan into a strategic arena and affected the nature and direction of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. The presence of external actors in Afghanistan, particularly NATO forces after 2001, created significant changes in regional security dynamics. Pakistan and Afghanistan developed different perceptions regarding foreign intervention, counterterrorism policies, and regional influence. The study investigates how NATO intervention and external strategic competition affected Pakistan-Afghanistan relations.

Objectives

1. To analyze the impact of NATO intervention on Pakistan-Afghanistan relations after 2001.
2. To examine how external strategic competition influenced diplomatic and security relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to understanding the influence of external powers on Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. It highlights how international interventions and regional competition affected bilateral trust, security cooperation, and diplomatic relations. The research is significant for scholars of international relations, regional security studies, and policymakers concerned with peace and stability in South Asia.

Literature Review

Maley (2002) argues that Afghanistan's political instability and recurring conflicts cannot be fully understood without examining the role of external actors and international interventions. He explains that Afghanistan's internal conflicts were significantly shaped by foreign involvement, as regional and global powers provided political, military, and financial support to different Afghan factions according to their strategic interests. Such external assistance influenced the balance of power among domestic groups and contributed to the continuation of armed conflicts. Maley further highlights that foreign intervention often generated unintended consequences because external actors frequently failed to understand Afghanistan's complex social structures, tribal dynamics, and political traditions. He argues that although international involvement was often justified through security or ideological objectives, it frequently weakened local political processes and increased dependence on external support. The study provides important insights into how international competition transformed Afghanistan into a geopolitical arena and affected the security calculations of neighbouring states, particularly Pakistan.Katzman (2010) examines United States and NATO policy in Afghanistan after 2001 and argues that international intervention was primarily based on two major objectives: counterterrorism operations and the establishment of a stable Afghan state. The study explains that NATO forces attempted to eliminate terrorist networks, strengthen Afghan security institutions, support democratic governance, and promote economic reconstruction. However, Katzman

highlights that these objectives faced significant challenges due to weak state institutions, corruption, limited government capacity, and difficulties in gaining legitimacy among local communities. He argues that international efforts often focused on building formal institutions without adequately addressing Afghanistan's complex political environment and local power structures. The study further suggests that military intervention alone could not resolve Afghanistan's long-term security problems because sustainable stability required effective governance, political reconciliation, and public trust. Katzman's analysis demonstrates how NATO involvement reshaped Afghanistan's political order while simultaneously creating challenges for regional actors, including Pakistan, which experienced increased security pressures along its western border. Khan (2012) analyzes Pakistan-Afghanistan security relations in the context of NATO intervention and argues that the international military presence significantly influenced bilateral tensions between Islamabad and Kabul. The study explains that NATO operations after 2001 altered the regional security environment by increasing militant movements, cross-border security challenges, and political disagreements between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Khan observes that Pakistan faced complex security pressures due to the presence of militant groups operating across the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, while Afghan authorities frequently accused Pakistan of providing support to certain insurgent elements. These mutual accusations contributed to declining trust between the two neighbouring states. The study further argues that NATO's approach to regional security often failed to fully address the interconnected nature of Afghanistan and Pakistan's security challenges. According to Khan, sustainable peace required stronger bilateral cooperation, effective border management, and mutual understanding between Kabul and Islamabad. The research highlights how external military involvement influenced not only Afghanistan's internal security situation but also the broader dynamics of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. Mastoor (2008) examines India's expanding role in Afghanistan after 2001 and argues that India's diplomatic, economic, and development activities became an important factor in South Asian strategic competition. The study explains that India increased its involvement in Afghanistan through reconstruction assistance, infrastructure development, humanitarian support, and political engagement with Afghan institutions. While India presented its role as focused on rebuilding Afghanistan and supporting economic development, Pakistan perceived this growing presence through a security-oriented perspective. Mastoor argues that Pakistan's concerns were influenced by historical rivalry with India and fears that Indian influence in Afghanistan could create strategic disadvantages for Islamabad. The study highlights that Afghanistan became a space where India and Pakistan attempted to strengthen their regional positions and pursue competing interests. Furthermore, it explains that India's engagement affected Pakistan's Afghan policy by increasing security concerns regarding strategic encirclement and regional balance of power. Mastoor's analysis demonstrates how external actors' involvement in Afghanistan contributed to wider geopolitical competition in South Asia. Ahmad (2011) explores the impact of foreign involvement in Afghanistan on Pakistan's Afghan policy and Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. The study argues that continuous external intervention shaped Pakistan's strategic approach toward Afghanistan by increasing security concerns and influencing Islamabad's perception of regional threats. Ahmad highlights that international involvement, particularly by major powers and neighbouring states, contributed to mistrust between Pakistan and Afghanistan because both countries often interpreted each other's policies through the lens of external competition. The research emphasizes that Afghanistan's dependence on foreign assistance and the involvement of external actors complicated bilateral relations by reducing opportunities for independent regional cooperation. Ahmad further argues that strategic competition among external powers created obstacles to achieving long-term peace and stability in Afghanistan. The study concludes that sustainable regional security requires cooperation, mutual confidence-building, and respect for each state's security concerns rather than competition for influence. This work provides valuable

understanding of how foreign intervention influenced Pakistan-Afghanistan relations and shaped regional geopolitical dynamics.

Methodology

This paper follows a qualitative historical methodology. The study uses analytical and descriptive methods to examine the influence of external actors on Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. Primary sources include official statements, government documents, and policy materials, while secondary sources include books, journal articles, newspapers, and previous research studies. The research examines important historical periods including Soviet intervention, Taliban rule, NATO intervention after 9/11, and post-2001 regional politics. Data is analyzed thematically to identify patterns related to foreign intervention, security challenges, and diplomatic tensions.

Analysis

Nato Intervention and the Transformation of Afghan Politics

The September 11 attacks changed the geopolitical environment of South Asia. The United States and NATO launched military operations in Afghanistan in October 2001 with the objective of removing the Taliban government and eliminating Al-Qaeda networks. Pakistan became a major partner in the War on Terror and abandoned its previous policy of supporting the Taliban government. (Ahmad, 2011). Pakistan's cooperation with NATO created both strategic opportunities and serious challenges. Islamabad received international assistance and recognition; however, domestic security problems increased due to militant reactions and instability along the Afghan border. Pakistan deployed security forces and conducted operations against militant groups. (Khan, 2012)

The NATO presence changed Afghanistan's political structure and introduced a new government under Hamid Karzai. While the international community focused on reconstruction and institution building, security challenges continued. Afghanistan accused Pakistan of supporting militant networks, while Pakistan argued that it suffered from terrorism originating from instability in Afghanistan. (Katzman, 2010)

External Actors and Regional Competition

The presence of NATO forces created a new regional environment in which different actors attempted to protect their interests. India increased its diplomatic engagement with Afghanistan after 2001 through economic assistance, infrastructure projects, and political cooperation. Pakistan viewed increasing Indian influence in Afghanistan through a security perspective. (Mastoor, 2008) Pakistan's concerns were connected with its historical rivalry with India and fears regarding strategic encirclement. Islamabad believed that Afghanistan's close relations with India could negatively affect Pakistan's regional security interests. These perceptions influenced Pakistan's approach toward Afghan political developments. (Ahmad, 2011) The United States also attempted to balance relations with Pakistan and Afghanistan. While Pakistan was considered an important ally in counterterrorism operations, disagreements emerged regarding militant sanctuaries and cross-border security. These disagreements weakened mutual trust between Pakistan and NATO partners. (Katzman, 2010)

Security Consequences for Pakistan

The War on Terror produced significant security and economic consequences for Pakistan. The country experienced terrorist attacks, military deployments, economic losses, and social disruption. The original research identifies that Pakistan suffered major human and economic costs due to its involvement in counterterrorism operations. (Ahmad, 2011) The Afghan conflict also increased pressure on Pakistan's border regions. Militancy, refugee movements, and instability affected areas particularly close to Afghanistan. Pakistan's security institutions argued that international actors

often underestimated the challenges faced by Pakistan during the conflict. (Khan, 2012)

Impact on Pakistan-Afghanistan Diplomatic Relations

Although NATO intervention aimed to stabilize Afghanistan, it also contributed to tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Accusations regarding militant support and cross-border attacks damaged diplomatic confidence. Afghan officials criticized Pakistan's policies, while Pakistani authorities highlighted their sacrifices in combating terrorism. (Khan, 2012). The involvement of external actors therefore became an additional factor influencing already complicated Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. Instead of eliminating regional competition, international intervention created new security calculations among neighboring states.

Findings:

The findings of this study demonstrate that external actors have significantly influenced the nature and direction of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. The analysis reveals that NATO intervention after 2001 and India's expanding strategic presence in Afghanistan transformed Afghanistan into a major arena of regional and international competition. Applying the framework of Neorealism (Structural Realism), the results indicate that states involved in Afghanistan acted primarily according to their security interests, strategic calculations, and attempts to enhance relative power. Neorealism argues that the international system is characterized by anarchy, where states cannot rely on a central authority for protection and therefore seek to maximize their security and influence (Waltz, 1979). The findings support this argument by showing that Afghanistan became a space where external actors pursued strategic objectives, resulting in changing regional power dynamics.

The first major finding is that NATO intervention significantly altered Afghanistan's political and security environment, which directly affected Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. The establishment of a new Afghan government, expansion of international military operations, and state-building initiatives created new political realities in the region. Although NATO's objectives focused on counterterrorism, governance improvement, and institutional development, the intervention faced challenges related to weak institutions, insurgency, and limited local legitimacy (Katzman, 2010). From a Neorealist perspective, the presence of NATO represented an external redistribution of power that influenced the strategic calculations of neighbouring states. Pakistan, due to its geographical proximity and security interests, viewed developments in Afghanistan through the lens of regional stability and national security (Fair, 2014). The second finding indicates that NATO intervention contributed to increased security challenges for Pakistan. The expansion of militant networks, cross-border movements, and disagreements over counterterrorism policies created tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan. The findings support Khan's (2012) argument that international involvement in Afghanistan produced security pressures for Pakistan by intensifying border instability and increasing mutual accusations between Kabul and Islamabad. Neorealism explains this situation through the concept of the security dilemma, where actions taken by one actor to enhance security may generate insecurity among others because intentions cannot always be clearly determined (Waltz, 1979). Thus, NATO's efforts to stabilize Afghanistan were interpreted differently by regional actors according to their own security interests. The results further reveal that India's strategic engagement in Afghanistan became a significant factor influencing Pakistan's foreign policy and security perceptions. India's involvement through development assistance, infrastructure projects, diplomatic cooperation, and institutional support strengthened its position in Afghanistan after 2001. While India presented its engagement as reconstruction-oriented, Pakistan interpreted the expansion of Indian influence as a strategic challenge. This finding supports Mastoor's (2008) argument that India's growing role in Afghanistan contributed to Pakistan's concerns regarding regional competition and strategic encirclement. Through the Neorealist framework, India's

engagement can be understood as an attempt to increase regional influence, while Pakistan's response represented an effort to maintain its relative strategic position.

Another important finding is that Afghanistan became an arena of India-Pakistan strategic competition. The study demonstrates that both states viewed Afghanistan as strategically important due to its geographical location and potential influence on regional security. India attempted to strengthen its partnership with Afghanistan through economic and diplomatic instruments, whereas Pakistan sought to preserve its traditional security interests and prevent hostile external influence near its western border. According to Dalrymple (2013), Afghanistan's political developments have historically been connected with broader India-Pakistan rivalry, where both states attempt to shape regional outcomes according to their strategic priorities. Neorealism explains this competition by emphasizing that states focus on relative gains and seek to prevent rivals from obtaining strategic advantages (Waltz, 1979). The findings also indicate that external involvement affected the trust relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan. The presence of NATO forces and India's increasing engagement contributed to perceptions of insecurity and suspicion between Islamabad and Kabul. Ahmad (2011) argues that foreign involvement influenced Pakistan's Afghan policy and increased mistrust between the two countries. The study confirms that Pakistan-Afghanistan relations were shaped not only by bilateral issues but also by the strategic interests of external actors operating within Afghanistan. The involvement of outside powers limited opportunities for genuine bilateral cooperation because regional actors often interpreted Afghan developments according to broader geopolitical competition.

Furthermore, the results show that Afghanistan's internal political dynamics remained an important factor despite external influence. Although NATO and India played significant roles in shaping Afghanistan's political environment, Afghan actors also pursued their own interests and attempted to balance relationships with different external partners. This finding supports Rubin's (2013) argument that Afghanistan should not be viewed only as a passive object of international competition but as a state with its own political objectives and internal complexities. Therefore, external influence interacted with domestic factors to shape the trajectory of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. Finally, the findings demonstrate that the post-2021 transformation in Afghanistan created a new regional environment. The withdrawal of NATO forces and the return of the Taliban changed the strategic calculations of India, Pakistan, and other regional actors. India adopted a cautious approach focused on humanitarian assistance and maintaining limited engagement, while Pakistan faced new security challenges related to border management and militancy. These developments support the Neorealist argument that states continuously adjust their strategies according to changes in the distribution of power and security conditions within the international system (Waltz, 1979).

Conclusion

The involvement of NATO forces and other external actors significantly influenced Pakistan-Afghanistan relations after 2001. While international intervention aimed to establish stability and counterterrorism cooperation, it also created new political and security challenges. Pakistan became a major partner in the War on Terror but simultaneously faced criticism and security consequences. The study concludes that external intervention interacted with existing historical disputes, creating a complex environment of mistrust between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Sustainable regional stability requires reducing strategic competition, improving bilateral communication, and developing cooperative security mechanisms.

Recommendations

1. Pakistan and Afghanistan should establish stronger bilateral security mechanisms to address cross-border challenges.

2. Regional powers should support Afghan stability rather than pursue competitive strategic interests.
3. International actors should encourage political reconciliation and economic development instead of relying primarily on military approaches.
4. Pakistan and Afghanistan should enhance trade and connectivity projects to promote mutual dependence.

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