

ENDING EXTERNAL MILITARY INTERVENTIONS IN AFGHANISTAN: EXIT DILEMMAS, POST-WITHDRAWAL LEGACIES, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PAKISTAN–AFGHANISTAN RELATIONS

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Abstract:

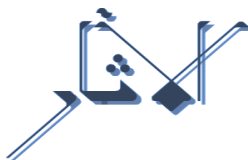
The withdrawal of foreign military forces from Afghanistan marked the end of one of the longest periods of external intervention in modern history and ushered in a new phase of regional political and security dynamics. This paper analyzes the difficulties in bringing external military interventions to a close in Afghanistan, with emphasis on the dilemmas of intervening powers as they tried to withdraw, the long-term political, economic and security impacts of external military interventions on Afghanistan, and the implications for Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. The study is based on a qualitative research approach, and utilizes a range of sources including official documents, policy reports, academic literature and regional security assessments to assess the impacts of the post-withdrawal context. The study contends that the pullout of foreign troops did not end Afghanistan's military presence, but rather did not address the more fundamental governance, security, and economic problems. Rather, the departure brought new challenges and uncertainties such as humanitarian crisis, border security issues, and threat of terrorism, refugee migrations, and the changing power dynamics in the region. The study also examines the impact of these developments on Pak-Afghan relations, identifying commonalities and longstanding tensions, such as border management, cross-border militancy, and economic ties. The study discusses about the general debate surrounding the issue of military withdrawal, post conflict state reconstruction and regional security in south Asia for a detailed analysis of the changing dynamics between Pakistan and Afghanistan after the external military intervention. The study find out that the post-withdrawal phase affords some opportunities and challenges to bilateral relations. Constructive engagement between Pakistan and Afghanistan, effective security cooperation and regional action and coordination on the long-term impacts of foreign intervention are essential factors for sustainable peace and regional stability. Future studies recommended that, examine the changing roles of Pakistan, China, Iran, Russia, and Central Asian states in Afghanistan's political and security landscape following the withdrawal of US military alliance.

Keywords: Afghanistan, External Military Intervention, Foreign Troop Withdrawal, Pakistan–Afghanistan Relations, Regional Security, Border Management, Cross-Border Militancy, Regional Stability.

Introduction

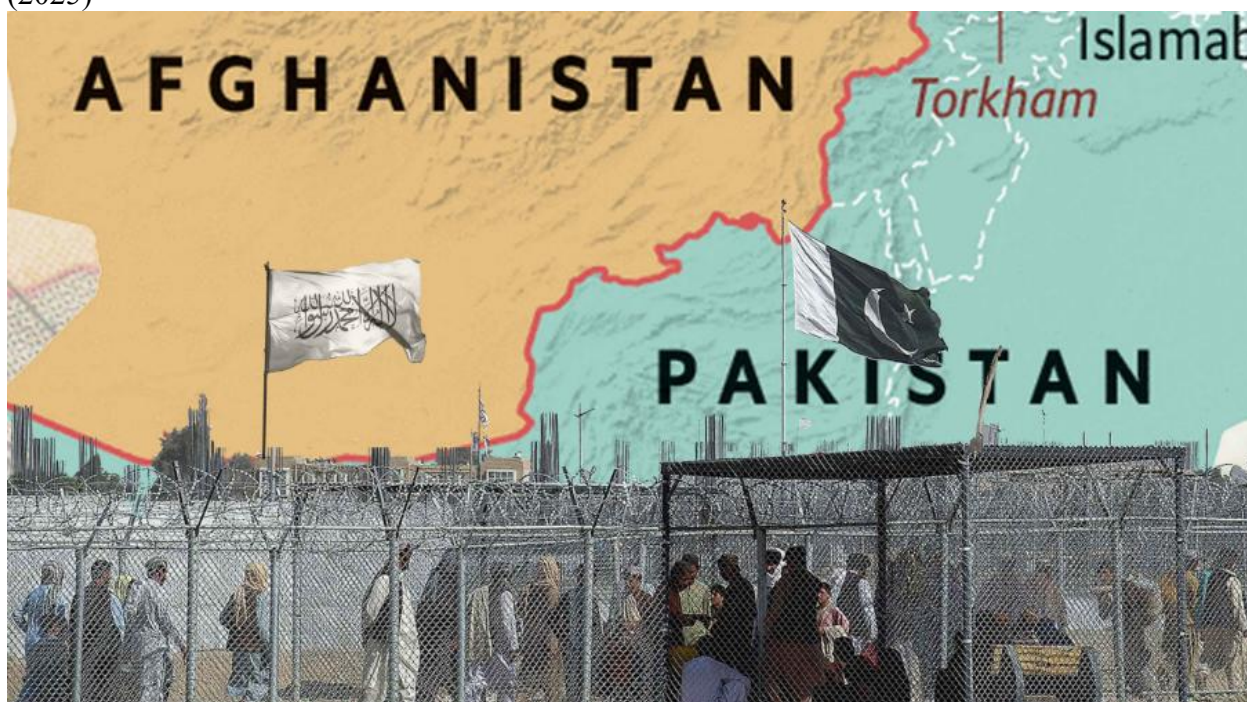
Since 1947, historical, political and security issues have been playing a major role in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. The conflicts between the two nations are ongoing, driven by factors such as border disputes, refugee movements, political mistrust, external interventions, and the influence of state and non-state actors, as scholars highlight. The study also proposes that even with challenges, regional cooperation and engagement are still vital for better Pakistan-Afghanistan relations and regional stability in the long-term.

Afghanistan's post-2020–2025 humanitarian crisis highlights the complex operational challenges faced by International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) following the withdrawal of foreign forces and the Taliban takeover in 2021. Post-withdrawal environment marked by economic collapse, political isolation, and restrictions on civil liberties—particularly affecting women—has created a highly constrained humanitarian space. Scholars

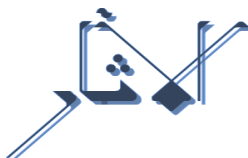


emphasize that INGOs have adopted adaptive strategies such as “strategic decoupling” and accelerated localization to balance donor non-recognition policies with the practical necessity of engaging with de facto authorities. However, the increasing operational restrictions, especially the 2022 ban on female NGO workers, have significantly undermined humanitarian effectiveness and raised concerns about the sustainability of principled aid delivery.

In addition to the immediate process of withdrawal, external actions have long-term political, economic and social impacts that affect the future trajectory of Afghanistan. Over the last 20 years, the involvement of international actors impacted on different aspects of Afghan society such as governance, security, education, media and civil society. The post-withdrawal phase, however, has been beset by economic insecurity, humanitarian crisis, diminished foreign support and political and human rights issues. At the same time, the ability to achieve long-term stability has been complicated by the militarization of networks and the appearance of new security challenges. These legacies after withdrawal attest to the legacy of intervention, which continues to impact local and international affairs beyond the removal of foreign soldiers from the country. Pakistan–Afghanistan relation has many implications in the context of the changing political scenario in Afghanistan. Pakistan has maintained close political, economic, cultural and security ties with Afghanistan throughout the years and what takes place on the other side of the border has direct significance for Pakistan. With the foreign troops' withdrawal, bilateral cooperation was expected to be better, but there have been a number of problems that have persisted. The two countries continue to have concerns on issues like border management, movements and influxes of refugees, cross-border militancy, and terrorism, disruption of trade and activities of non-state actors. At the same time, opportunities for enhanced regional connectivity, economic cooperation, and diplomatic engagement have emerged, highlighting the complex nature of post-withdrawal bilateral relations. Popalzay (2025)



Source: <https://thekhorasandiary.com/en/2024/08/14/economic-cost-of-conflict-trade-suffers-amid-pak-afghan-border-tension>



The situation in Afghanistan is. This is affecting the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. Tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan have increased since the Taliban took power in 2021 with fights over security and territory. On August 12 2024 there was a fight near Torkham between Pakistani forces and the Taliban, which caused many casualties and disrupted the important Torkham-Jalalabad route. This was not the time as there were earlier clashes along the Kunar/Bajaur/Dir border showing that disputes and security challenges are still happening despite some cooperation.

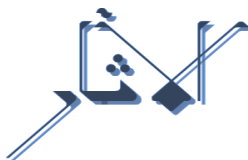


Source: <https://pakasiayouthforum.com/>

From 2021 to 2024 Pakistan tried to improve relations with Afghanistan through efforts focusing on peace, regional stability and cooperation, between the two countries. Pakistan did this by talking to high-level officials taking part in meetings and providing humanitarian help. Pakistan wanted to keep talking address security issues and support Afghanistans stability. These efforts show that Pakistan is committed to having relations and developing the region. (PAYF)

This study is about the end of interventions in Afghanistan by other countries. It looks at the problems these countries face when they leave and how their actions affect Afghanistan and Pakistan in the run. The study uses an approach to research and looks at many different sources to help people understand more about when armies leave a country how to rebuild after a war and how to keep a region safe. The study says that even though the war is over the effects of all the fighting are still a problem for Pakistan and Afghanistan. These two countries are still having a time getting along and being at peace. We need to understand what is going on between Pakistan and Afghanistan so we can make plans to keep the area safe and help the two countries work together. The end of interventions in Afghanistan is very important to Pakistan and Afghanistan relations. The study of the end of interventions in Afghanistan can help us learn more, about how to make Pakistan and Afghanistan relations better.

Research Questions



1. How can the success and failure of external interventions in Afghanistan be assessed in terms of conflict resolution, state-building, and regional stability?
2. What domestic, regional, and international factors shaped the decision-making process leading to the withdrawal of external actors from Afghanistan?
3. How have the post-exit legacies of external interventions influenced governance, economic development, security dynamics, and bilateral relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan?

Research Objectives

1. To assess the successes and failures of external interventions in Afghanistan regarding conflict resolution, state-building, and regional stability.
2. To examine the domestic, regional, and international factors influencing the withdrawal of external actors from Afghanistan.
3. To analyze the post-withdrawal impacts on governance, economic development, security, and Pakistan–Afghanistan relations.

Contribution to International Research

This study adds to the growing body of post-conflict literature and research on external interventions, conflict termination and state building in the context of Afghanistan and the implications for Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. Much of the scholarship that has already been written has been devoted to the evaluation of the success of foreign interventions in attaining military, political and security goals. Few studies however, have focused on the relationship between intervention outcomes (success or failure), the processes by which interventions are terminated, and the long-term consequences of interventions in the region. In 2021, with the international forces having withdrawn from Afghanistan, it is a special opportunity to examine these interlinked aspects.

First, the study brings into question the traditional notion of whether intervention is successful or not, and whether it fails or not, and whether it is withdrawn or not, as separate events. Rather it frames the process of intervention ending as a continuum of pre-exit decision making, exit processes, and post-exit outcomes. The research documents the effects of the intervention beyond its official withdrawal from the country.

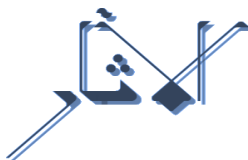
Second, the study contributes to theoretical debates by exploring the linkage between intervention performance and exit strategies. It looks at the reasons why international involvement in Afghanistan was ended or not extended due to military success, political restrictions, domestic pressures and regional dynamics. This strategy can be used to fill the gap between effectiveness of interventions in the literature and the growing body of research on terminating interventions.

Third, the study contributes to the research of the long-term political, economic and security effects of external withdrawal. Special focus is placed on implications for Afghanistan's internal stability and on the impact on Pakistan both in terms of border security and in terms of refugee.

The research focuses on three interrelated areas: (1) successes and failures of outsider interventions in Afghanistan; (2) the dynamics and dilemmas of terminating interventions; and (3) the political, economic and security legacies of withdrawal for Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The study is conducted through research design and research methods

Qualitative research design used in this study to examine the success, failure, termination and post-exit consequences of the external interventions in Afghanistan and are their implications for Pakistan–Afghanistan relations in particular. The research is structured in three interrelated work packages (WPs) which are related to the research questions at the heart of the project.



WP1: Mapping Intervention Success, Failure, and Termination in Afghanistan

The first work package aims to conduct a systemic analysis of the impact of large-scale external interventions in Afghanistan between 1979 and 2024, such as the Soviet intervention, United States' military intervention and NATO operations, and related peace building efforts. This phase will systematically review intervention goals, outcomes, and termination processes using secondary data sources, policy documents, military data, UN data, and academic/scholarly literature. The analysis will pinpoint patterns of success and failure with respect to security stabilization, state-building, counterterrorism and peace consolidation. Careful attention will be drawn to the impact of intervention outcomes on timing and type of withdrawals.

WP2: Explaining Exit Dilemmas and Withdrawal Processes

The second work package looks at the political, strategic and institutional context that influenced the end of outside involvement in Afghanistan. The study uses a mixed method approach of qualitative interviews, policy analysis and process tracing. Academics, policy makers, security experts, diplomats, and regionals from Pakistan and Afghanistan will be interviewed, using a semi-structured approach. These interviews will be supplemented by an examination of official documents, peace agreements, strategic documents and media reports. This will assist in identifying the costs, benefits and dilemmas that were experienced by intervening powers, local actors and regional stakeholders.

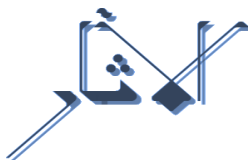
WP3: Assessing Post-Exit Legacies and Regional Consequences

The third work package investigates the long-term political, economic, and security consequences of intervention withdrawal. It combines quantitative trend analysis with qualitative case-study methods. Quantitative indicators will include levels of political stability, violent conflict, refugee flows, border incidents, trade patterns, and economic performance before and after intervention termination. Process-tracing techniques will be employed to examine how post-withdrawal developments in Afghanistan have affected Pakistan–Afghanistan relations. Particular focus will be placed on cross-border security challenges, migration dynamics, counterterrorism cooperation, diplomatic engagement, and regional economic connectivity. This integrated approach allows for a comprehensive assessment of both domestic and regional post-exit legacies.

Significance of the Study

The study is relevant as it gives a holistic picture of the end of external military interventions in Afghanistan and the consequences of these interventions on the regional security, political stability, and the relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The pull-out of foreign troops in 2021 presented both challenges and opportunities for Afghanistan and all its neighbors as the geopolitical landscape of the South Asian region changed. The study addresses an important gap in existing literature, which tends to focus more on the consequences of intervening powers than on exit dilemmas, the political, economic and security legacies of foreign involvement, and how intervention affects the bilateral relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan. The research is relevant to the study of issues like border security, cross-border militancy, refugee movement, regional connectivity etc., and also, to the study of diplomatic engagements in the post-Withdrawal period. Additionally, the study provides important policy, security and regional stakeholder lessons to support the design of more effective strategies for peacebuilding, conflict management and sustainable regional cooperation. The study will be useful for International Relations, Security Studies and South Asian Studies, and also offer recommendations for achieving sustainable peace and engagement in the region in the light of the broader implications of Pakistan's military pullout.

Methodological Contribution



The study combines outcome evaluation, exit-process analysis, and post-withdrawal evaluation in one analytical framework, which is beyond the traditional approach of intervention research that focuses on the success of the intervention, its cessation, and the consequences of the withdrawal. The qualitative approach allows for general analytical conclusions and for in-depth contextual insights, which helps to inform theoretical and policy debates on intervention termination, conflict management and regional security in South Asia.

Literature Review

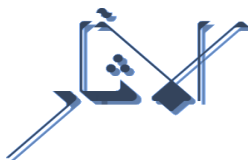
It is important to emphasize the long history of strategic engagement between the United States and the Central Americas that has been driven by geopolitical, economic, and security interests, as demonstrated by Arshad et al. (2023). The general consensus of scholars on the United States' intervention in the region has been that it has been a pattern of repeated direct and indirect interventions that have had a notable impact on the political stability and institutional development of the states in Central America. Meanwhile, the research highlights the necessity of economic interdependence, especially in relation to trade agreements like CAFTA-DR, which have strengthened the uneven, but permanent, economic relation. While many of the texts address historical trends of intervention and/or the recent debate on migration and security, few address how past interventions continue to influence current political and economic dynamics.

Wani (2025) suggests that in October 2025, Pakistan-Afghanistan relations deteriorated significantly, with reports of airstrikes, military responses, and high casualties on both sides. The battle reportedly started with airstrikes by Pakistani forces against alleged groups of militants in Afghanistan, then escalated with increased clashes in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan along the Durand Line with an assault on a Pakistani border post. However, despite some back-and-forth diplomacy in the capitals of Doha and Istanbul, the talks were unsuccessful as the two sides could not resolve their differences on cross-border militancy, especially Pakistan's fears over the activities of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) from Afghan soil. The failure of negotiations and the prevailing lack of trust point to the precarious state of bilateral relations and to the underlying security threats in the region of South and Central Asia.

Hilali (2017) analyze the development of the relations of Pakistan and Afghanistan against the background of the Soviet-Afghan War and the post-war period. The author pays special attention to security problems, regional actors, militant groups, refugees, and continued intervention. The study reveals an interesting historical background to the development of Pakistan's security policy toward Afghanistan.

The study by Siddique (2011) deals with Pakistan's Afghan policy taking into consideration such aspects as strategic depth, militant movements, India, and the USA. It is evident that the security environment and concerns have had a significant impact on Pakistan's approach toward Afghanistan. The relevance of the paper to this research lies in the demonstration of the fact that the withdrawal of forces has only changed, but not eliminated Pakistan's security challenges in the region.

Khan (2017) studies the Pakistan–Afghanistan border problem, which includes many challenges related to border control. The author demonstrates the persistent role of the Durand Line as a major source of contention between Pakistan and Afghanistan as well as the attempts of Pakistan to strengthen border controls. The border disagreement remains a relevant aspect of the post-withdrawal security environment.



Rehman (2023) analyzes the controversy related to the Durand Line from historical and legal perspectives and demonstrates that the dispute can hardly be viewed as a modern-day border and security problem. The historical agreements, the problem of sovereignty and territory, and competing national narratives are among the issues that remain relevant even after the 2021 withdrawal because they continue to cause problems in relations between Pakistan and the Taliban regime.

Meng et al, (2024) analyze the effects of prolonged armed conflict in Afghanistan on its economy. The results of the research indicate that decades of conflict resulted in the poor economic performance of the country. As a result of the weak condition, there are indirect negative implications for Pakistan caused by refugees, economic pressure due to the development of cross-border trade, insecurity, and instability in the region.

Smith and Cynthia (2004) discuss the security concerns persisting between Pakistan and Afghanistan. In particular, the researchers consider the activities of militant organizations and mutual accusations. Pakistan has always accused militant groups operating in Afghan territories of attacking Pakistan while Afghanistan has accused Pakistan of the involvement in the activity of militant actors. The study shows how such security concerns lead to mutual distrust and anti-Pakistan sentiments of Afghan refugees in Pakistan.

According to Brecher (2017), there is always the potential of enhancing the Pakistan-Afghanistan relations because of the similarities between the two countries. The study indicates that despite the existing political and security disagreements, the similarities between the two nations make it possible to develop positive relationships. This is further evidenced by the remarks by the leaders of Afghanistan indicating the need to be friends with Pakistan.

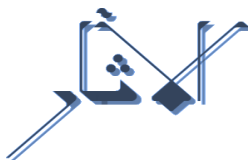
Findings

The findings of the study showed that when external military forces left Afghanistan, vulnerabilities became apparent in the process of state building carried out over the past 20 years. Many of these governance, security and economic development institutions were established and funded, but they failed to be sustainable without outside assistance. The speed of the political change after the withdrawal revealed the problems of external nation-building initiatives, and showed that military action is an unlikely means of durable peace.

It found that the post-withdrawal period has been beset with intricate political, economic and security issues. Despite some signs of economic consolidation, Afghanistan remains plagued by economic volatility, humanitarian issues, governance challenges and security threats from militant groups in the country and beyond. These legacies of withdrawal have not only had an impact on Afghanistan's internal stability, but have also raised broader regional security concerns that demand co-ordinated action from the neighboring countries and from the international community.

Changing political and security situation in Afghanistan has been an impact on Pakistan Afghanistan relations, the study found. The conclusion of foreign military involvement opened space for improved bilateral cooperation in areas like trade, regional connectivity and diplomatic relations, however, border management issues, cross-border militancy, refugee flows and mutual security concerns remain troublesome. The results indicate that the bilateral cooperation should be done in sustainable manner, which relies on strengthening the trust and security coordination, and constant diplomatic communication between the two nations.

The conclusion of external military operations in Afghanistan is a huge geopolitical shift that will have long-term repercussions for Afghanistan, and for South Asia. The study finds that withdrawal of troops is not the answer to the political, social, and security problems. Rather,



how interventions end is vital to the outcomes of the conflict and to the chances of long-term stability.

Conclusion

The study findings show that the effects of foreign intervention remain a part of the legacy in Afghanistan's political system, economy and security. However, there has been important work done by external actors in governance, education and infrastructure, but many gains have been fragile, in the face of continued conflict and weak institutional capacity. Hence, for Afghanistan to be a stable country in the future, good governance, economic reconstruction and political structures that are conducive to domestic and regional challenges are crucial.

The study also projects that Pakistan-Afghanistan relations will continue to play a key role in the post-withdrawal era of peace and security in the region. Cooperative efforts are needed for challenges like border security, terrorism, refugee management, and economic development which are shared with others, not acting alone. It is hoped that bilateral dialogue and greater cooperation between the two neighboring states through cooperation mechanisms can help to substantially lessen tensions and foster sustainable peace between the countries.

Suggestions for Further Studies

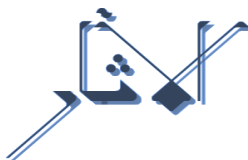
Future studies can be extended to make a comparative study of military withdrawals from Afghanistan and other operations from conflicts like Iraq and Vietnam, to find similarities, differences and lessons for future interventions on international soil. Comparative analyses of this kind might improve the knowledge of what makes for a successful or unsuccessful post-withdrawal transition.

The changing dynamics of regional actors, especially Pakistan, China, Iran, Russia and the Central Asian countries, in the political and security landscape of Afghanistan following the withdrawal of Western forces could be further studied. This should give a better understanding of the new power play in the region and its effects on regional peace.

Empirical study of socio-economic and security implications of post withdrawal developments from both sides of the border on border communities can be undertaken by future researchers. Such research may cover topics such as trade, migration, border control, radicalization and perceptions of security and may help inform policy development and collaborative efforts in the region.

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