

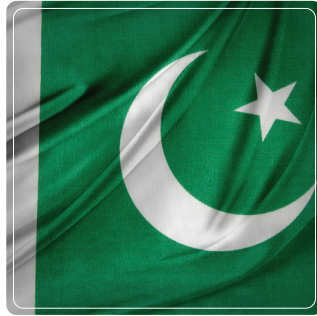
PAKISTAN'S RESPONSE TO THE CURRENT SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN AN ASSESSMENT?

MUHAMMAD YASEEN NASEEM

SETA | ANALYSIS

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SUMMARY

Afghans have a historic opportunity to decide their future and neighboring countries must help them by recognizing the new realities emerging in Afghanistan.

From day one, Pakistan did not favor the war in Afghanistan but underscored the significance of negotiations as an ultimate solution to the problem. Even during the American military campaign in Afghanistan, its diplomatic discourse also refrained from choosing favorites in Afghanistan. On the security front, compared to other immediate neighboring countries of Afghanistan, Pakistan has largely suffered from the events that took place in Afghanistan. Despite facing many security challenges from Afghan soil, it has maintained its respect for the **sovereignty and territorial integrity** of Afghanistan. With regard to its constructive efforts for supporting the peace process in Afghanistan, Pakistan has always supported all international forums geared towards introducing enduring peace, political stability, and sustainable economic development in Afghanistan. It adopted the policy of supporting an **Afghan-led and Afghan-owned** peace process. Further, it wholeheartedly recognizes the ethnic diversity of Afghanistan and wants to see an independent, sovereign, peaceful, prosperous, and stable Afghanistan since that is in the best interest of Pakistan. Now, Afghans have a **historic opportunity** to decide their future and neighboring countries must help them by recognizing the new realities emerging in Afghanistan. Regarding development assistance and humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, Pakistan has always remained at the forefront. It has opened its borders, ports, and air corridors for the international community to send their humanitarian aid packages not only for Afghans but also for Afghan refugees living in the neighboring countries.

and peacefully they decide their political future and which roles they seek from neighboring and regional countries to play for reconstruction and development in Afghanistan. The rapidly changing circumstances in Afghanistan have compelled Pakistan to take on a **leading role** in the evacuation of foreign citizens, reconciliation between Afghans, and coordination between the neighboring and regional countries for addressing the current situation in Afghanistan. This piece of writing presents a humble assessment of a dedicated response of Pakistan to the uncertain situation in Afghanistan.

EVOLVING SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN

From day one, Pakistan did not favor the war in Afghanistan but underscored the significance of negotiations as an ultimate solution to the problem. Even during the American military campaign in Afghanistan, its diplomatic discourse also refrained from choosing favorites in Afghanistan. Like other neighbors, Pakistan has always suffered from the events that took place in Afghanistan. Therefore, Pakistan has to adopt a position on salient issues pertaining to Afghanistan. Right after the withdrawal of the Soviets, the Western powers left the Mujahedeen and Afghanistan without facilitating a political settlement in the 1990s. This time again they have left the country without making any commitment to uplifting the social, political, and administrative infrastructure in the country. Contrary to the past, neighboring and regional countries have come to the forefront and taken the responsibility of bringing peace, stability, and prosperity to Afghanistan, but they have left it to the Afghans regarding how quickly

The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan took control of the capital Kabul militarily on August 15, 2021, without any major military clashes with the former administration of Kabul. The unceremonious exit of former President Ashraf Ghani increased the pace of events in Afghanistan. This event further deteriorated the security infrastructure, weakened the political alliance, increased the economic meltdown, and diminished the trust of the Afghan public in the American-supported so-called democratic government in Afghanistan.¹ Hence, these developments led neighboring and regional countries to adopt a very cohesive stance on the uncertain situation in Afghanistan. They demanded assurances from the Taliban to respect human rights, women's rights, and minority rights; to prevent Afghan soil from being used against any country; to reconcile with all Afghan factions; and to introduce an inclusive

¹ "Ashraf Ghani: 'I apologize that I could not make it end differently'", *BBC*, September 09, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58496410>

political setup for enduring peace, stability, and reconstruction in Afghanistan.²

This time, the Taliban have behaved differently and tried to change the perception of all internal and external observers. They allowed foreigners to leave the country safely; permitted women and girls to join the workplace and attend schools; agreed that minorities could visit their places of worship and maintain their private businesses, etc.³ At the same time, the Taliban leadership remained in contact with all Afghan factions, including the leadership of Panjshir Valley, for reconciliation and forming a future political setup. More recently, the Taliban have taken control of Afghanistan and also declared an **exclusive interim government** that largely faces criticism from local stakeholders and the international community. Currently, it is neither representative nor inclusive in nature by any means. Furthermore, some of the top leadership of this setup are included in the United Nations Security Council's list of terrorists under resolutions 1267 and 1988. So, appointing internationally sanctioned figures in key positions in the government may lead the country towards further isolation and more international sanctions in the future.⁴

Apart from political issues, the rising financial liquidity crisis and the emergency need for humanitarian assistance for Afghans top the list of critical issues pertaining to Afghanistan. United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has warned that the population of over

18 million in Afghanistan requires assistance for survival.⁵ The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has recently estimated that about 97% of the population in Afghanistan is in danger and will have to be recognized as poor by mid-2022.⁶ The international community is putting pressure on the US to unfreeze the reserves and assets of over US\$9 billion of Afghanistan's central bank. The Taliban are also trying to get access to their financial assets frozen under UNSCR 1267 and 1988. If these assets are released, the Afghan public will receive immediate relief. So far, China, Pakistan, Qatar, the UAE, Turkey, and some European countries have ensured their humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, but the situation needs to be addressed by a collective response from the whole international community on an emergency basis.

RESPONSE TO THE INTERIM GOVERNMENT IN AFGHANISTAN

Pakistan has always shared close historical, cultural, linguistic, political, and economic relationships with Afghanistan. With good faith, it has always favored forging a friendly and good-neighborly relationship with all governments in Afghanistan. Despite facing many security challenges from Afghan soil, it has maintained its respect for the **sovereignty and territorial integrity** of Afghanistan. The key principles of Pakistan's foreign policy towards Afghanistan also include strengthening people-to-people contact, deepen-

2 "World reacts as Taliban closes in on Afghan capital", *Al-Jazeera*, August 16, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/15/world-reacts-to-taliban-closing-in-on-afghan-capital>

3 Ahmed Seir, Rahim Faiez, Kathy Gannon and Joseph Krauss, "Taliban vow to respect women, despite history of oppression", *AP News*, August 18, 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-taliban-kabul-1d4b052cce113adc8dc94f965ff23c7>

4 Senator Rehman Malik, "The Interim Government", *The Nation*, September 10, 2021. <https://nation.com.pk/10-Sep-2021/the-interim-government>

5 Michael Hernandez, "UN Chief warns of impending 'Humanitarian Catastrophe' in Afghanistan", Anadolu Agency, August 08, 2021. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/americas/un-chief-warns-of-impending-humanitarian-catastrophe-in-afghanistan/2351870>

6 "Afghanistan on the brink of Universal Poverty", *Al-Jazeera*, September 09, 2021. https://www.aljazeera.com/amp/news/2021/9/9/nearly-all-afghans-to-plunge-into-poverty-by-mid-2022-warns-un?__twitter_impression=true

ing transit and trade ties, undertaking joint connectivity and energy projects, working together for bringing peace, and non-interference in the internal affairs of each country.⁷

Despite facing many security challenges from Afghan soil, Pakistan has maintained its respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Afghanistan.

Concerning the recognition of the interim government in Afghanistan, Pakistan is closely observing the situation and waiting for a positive response from the international community. It is aiming for a **coordinated approach** to addressing the issues in Afghanistan. So far, China has proactively responded and called this development a necessary step for restoring socio-economic order and the need for reconstruction in Afghanistan. Similarly, the Uzbek leadership has also welcomed the decision of the Taliban's leadership, but most of the international community is generally waiting for the commitments of the Taliban for the upcoming political setup, which must be inclusive, representative, and moderate in dealing with the internal and external affairs of the country.

PEACE-MAKING EFFORTS AND ROLE IN THE INTRA-AFGHAN RECONCILIATION PROCESS

With regard to its protracted policy of supporting the peace process in Afghanistan, Pakistan has always supported all international forums

geared towards introducing enduring peace, political stability, and sustainable economic development in Afghanistan. It adopted the policy of supporting an **Afghan-led and Afghan-owned** peace process. Moreover, Pakistan participated in the meetings of Kabul Process-I & II, the Heart of Asia Conference: Istanbul Process, the Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan (RECCA), the Moscow Format on Afghanistan, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Contact Group on Afghanistan, the International Contact Group on Afghanistan, the Six Party Talks,⁸ Troika-Plus, the Turkey-Afghanistan-Pakistan Trilateral Summit, the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Trilateral Summit, the US-Afghanistan-Pakistan-Uzbekistan diplomatic platform, and others.

On the day Kabul fell to the Taliban (August 15, 2021), Pakistan hosted an Afghan delegation⁹ mostly comprised of **anti-Taliban politicians** of the former administration of Ashraf Ghani. The delegation held meetings with the top diplomatic and political leadership in Pakistan over the evolving situation in Afghanistan and further discussed the future of the reconciliation process between Afghans. Technically, this development refuted the blame game of critics, who always narrated that the Taliban are sponsored by Pakistan. Actually, the Taliban were in Kabul and their arch-rivals were state guests in Islamabad for discussing the future of Afghanistan, and Pakistan was reassuring them that its constructive peace efforts will continue until a lasting peace in Afghanistan is established. It was also acknowledged by both sides that Afghanistan is composed of a **multi-ethnic society**, so only an inclusive and negotiated po-

⁷ "Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations", *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan*, 2019. <http://mofa.gov.pk/testing-language/>

⁸ "Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations", *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan*, 2019. <http://mofa.gov.pk/testing-language/>

⁹ "Visit of the Delegation from Afghanistan, 15-18 August 2021", *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan*, August 16, 2021. <http://mofa.gov.pk/visit-of-the-delegation-from-afghanistan-15-18-august-2021/>

litical settlement can bring peace and stability to the country.

LEADING ROLE IN COORDINATED EFFORTS IN THE REGION

Since August 15, 2021, the prime minister of Pakistan was contacted by 13 world leaders, including the UN general secretary, for addressing the evolving situation in Afghanistan. Similarly, the foreign minister of Pakistan hosted six foreign ministers in Islamabad, received phone calls from his counterparts from 25 countries, held numerous virtual meetings, and visited multiple capitals for adopting a coordinated and guided approach towards Afghanistan.¹⁰

To establish a regional consensus for the role of neighboring countries towards assisting the Afghans for a future political settlement in Afghanistan, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi went on his **regional tour** (August 25-26, 2021) and held meetings with the highest political and diplomatic leadership of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Iran, and successfully built a consensus for having regular **close coordination** and adopting a **coordinated approach** towards dealing the issues in Afghanistan.¹¹

Further, Pakistan's Special Representative for Afghanistan, Ambassador Mohammad Sadiq, held a virtual meeting of special representatives of neighboring countries of Afghanistan on September 5, 2021, which included China, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Iran.

They discussed the evolving challenges and emerging opportunities for Afghanistan as well as for the region. The meeting concluded with a consensus that "a prosperous and peaceful Afghanistan would provide impetus to **economic integration**, strong people-to-people linkages, enhanced trade, and **regional connectivity**."¹²

The day after the Taliban announced an interim government, the foreign minister of Pakistan held a very important video conference of foreign ministers of immediate neighboring countries of Afghanistan on September 8, 2021. In his opening remarks, Mr. Qureshi appreciated the welcoming response of neighboring and regional countries for recognizing Pakistan's **constructive efforts for peace and stability** in Afghanistan. He further appreciated the promising consensus of these countries on multiple Afghan issues, which include maintaining security along the borders; deterring terrorist organizations from using Afghan soil; avoiding the situation of a fresh influx of refugees and the spread of COVID-19 pandemic; checking networks involved in transnational crimes, drugs, and narcotics; curbing the possible spread of extremist elements, and discouraging the impediments of economic integration and regional connectivity.¹³

The meeting underscored that Afghans have suffered a lot due to prolonged conflict and political instability for over four decades. Now, they have a **historic opportunity** to decide their future and neighboring countries must help them by recognizing the new realities emerging in Afghani-

10 "Transcript of the Press briefing by spokesperson on Friday, 10 September 2021", *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan*, September 10, 2021. <http://mofa.gov.pk/transcript-of-the-press-briefing-by-spokesperson-on-friday-10-september-2021/>

11 Iftikhar A. Khan, "Qureshi leaves for four nation tour to discuss Afghan situation", *Dawn*, August 25, 2021. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1642503>

12 "Pakistan hosts meeting of special representatives/envoys of neighbors of Afghanistan, 5 September 2021", *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan*, September 05, 2021. <http://mofa.gov.pk/pakistan-hosts-meeting-of-special-representatives-envoys-of-neighbours-of-afghanistan-5-september-2021/>

13 "Foreign Ministers' Opening Remarks Ministerial meeting of neighbors of Afghanistan (8 September 2021)", *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan*, September 08, 2021. <http://mofa.gov.pk/foreign-ministers-opening-remarks-ministerial-meeting-of-neighbors-of-afghanistan-8-september-2021/>

stan. Mr. Qureshi emphasized that our shared response must follow a promised coordinated approach for the well-being of the Afghan people.¹⁴

Pakistan wholeheartedly recognizes the ethnic diversity of Afghanistan and wants to see an independent, sovereign, peaceful, prosperous, and stable Afghanistan since that is in the best interest of Pakistan.

The **joint statement** of the meeting declared support for the **policy of non-interference** in the internal affairs of Afghanistan; the future of the country to be decided by Afghans themselves; the sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of Afghanistan to be preserved; the peace, stability, security, reconciliation and reconstruction of Afghanistan to be promoted; an inclusive, open, moderate and representative government to be recognized; fundamental human rights, women rights, children rights and minority rights to be protected; the threat of internal and external spoilers to be thwarted; the international community to be engaged for development, reconstruction and humanitarian aid; the deterrence of misuse of Afghan territory; footholds of **ETIM, ISIS, Al-Qaeda, Jondollah, TTP, BLA** and such groups to be uprooted from Afghan soil; borders and ports to remain open for international aid, assistance and trade for Afghanistan; technical, food and medical supplies to be ensured; production of narcotics and drugs to be stopped; the UN, its entities and other international organizations specialized in humani-

tarian assistance to be facilitated and protected; sustainable and regular support be provided to neighboring countries (also) for hosting and facilitating the repatriation of Afghan refugees; international organizations and financial institutions to be facilitated for completing their projects in Afghanistan; international transport, energy, communications, infrastructure and other projects to be implemented and completed with possible assistance of neighboring countries; special representatives and envoys for Afghanistan to hold regular meetings for consultations; and foreign ministers of participating countries to chair similar meetings on a rotating basis.¹⁵

The above-mentioned constructive efforts of Pakistan show that it does not want to make any decision that undermines the coordinated approach adopted to address these issues nor does it have favorites among Afghan factions in Afghanistan. It wholeheartedly recognizes the ethnic diversity of Afghanistan and wants to see an independent, sovereign, peaceful, prosperous, and stable Afghanistan since that is in the best interest of Pakistan.

EFFORTS FOR BILATERAL TRADE AND RELAXATIONS IN TRANSIT FACILITIES

On the economic front, Afghanistan remained Pakistan's top export partner. The bilateral trade volume has always remained higher than US\$2.5 billion, but the American-supported governments discouraged the business communities of both sides from conducting bilateral trade by

14 "Foreign Ministers' meeting on the Afghan issue among the neighbors of Afghanistan, 8 September 2021", *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan*, September 08, 2021. <http://mofa.gov.pk/foreign-ministers-meeting-on-the-afghan-issue-among-the-neighboring-countries-of-afghanistan-8-september-2021/>

15 "Joint Statement issued at the conclusion of the Foreign Ministers' meeting on the Afghan issue among the neighbors of Afghanistan-8 September 2021", *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan*, September 09, 2021. <http://mofa.gov.pk/joint-statement-issued-at-the-conclusion-of-the-foreign-ministers-meeting-on-the-afghan-issue-among-the-neighboring-countries-of-afghanistan-8-september-2021/>

creating technical, legal and logistic hurdles. Despite the challenges, economists say the potential of yearly bilateral trade lies between US\$8 billion-\$10 billion.¹⁶ Besides emphasizing bilateral trade, Pakistan has provided a transit trade route to Afghanistan since 1965. Later, it was revised in 2010 and extended for an agreed period. In the current circumstances, Pakistan has opened its borders for trade and transit facilities so that the business community and overall economy of Afghanistan could survive and flourish.¹⁷

Experience shows that the transit facilities meant to serve the business community of Afghanistan have mostly benefited smugglers of both sides who pose the biggest threat to the national economies of Pakistan and Afghanistan. Since Pakistan's independence from British India to the event of 9/11, the 2,670-kilometer-long Pak-Afghan border remained porous and could not be managed properly. Therefore, networks of smugglers installed a parallel black economy on both sides. Now, the situation has changed, and Pakistan has almost achieved its target of fencing the border. Hence, cross-border movement and transportation of goods have almost regularized. Further, the interim set up in Afghanistan is aware of the reality on the ground and knows the significance of the collection of taxes, duties, tariffs, and customs in the current circumstances for smoothly running state affairs. So, good coordination is expected from both sides to eliminate the threats to the national economies of both countries.¹⁸

16 "Pak-Afghan bilateral trade has vast potential: SAARC CCI chief", *The Express Tribune*, August 30, 2021. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2317709/pak-afghan-bilateral-trade-has-vast-potential-saarc-cci-chief>

17 Amin Ahmad, "Afghan transit trade pact extended for six months", *Dawn*, July 09, 2021. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1634025/afghan-transit-trade-pact-extended-for-six-months>

18 Mubarak Zeb Khan, "Trade with Afghanistan picks up after fall of Kabul", *Dawn*, August 19, 2021. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1641524> Dr. Syed Waqar Hussain, Asmat Ullah and Dr. Bashir Ahmad, "The Causes of Transit related Pak-Afghan cross bordered Smuggling", *The Dialogue*, Vol. 9, No. 1. pp. 39-66.

DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE AND HUMANITARIAN AID FOR AFGHANISTAN

Pakistan has always remained at the forefront regarding development assistance and humanitarian aid to Afghanistan. According to its financial capacity, it has invested in infrastructure development, the capacity building of education and health sectors, reforms in the agriculture sector, and the training of Afghan professionals. It built three hospitals in Afghanistan, namely Jinnah Hospital Kabul, the Nishtar Kidney Center in Jalalabad, and Naib Aminullah Khan Logar Hospital. It sponsored and completed several development-related projects, which include: Torkham-Jalalabad Road (75 km), Torkham-Jalalabad Additional Carriage way (73 km), 15 weighbridges, donation of road construction machinery, and the donation of a telecom and electricity system.¹⁹ On a humanitarian basis, it has hosted more than 4 million Afghan refugees for over four decades as well as sent aid packages to the government of Afghanistan during natural calamities or manmade crises in the country. Most recently, it sent three C-130 aircraft full of food and medical supplies and promised more aid packages, which will reach Afghanistan by road.²⁰ It has opened its borders, ports, and air corridors for the international community to send their humanitarian aid packages not only for Afghans but also for Afghan refugees living in the neighboring countries.

19 "Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations", *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan*, 2019. <http://mofa.gov.pk/testing-language/>

20 Sana Jamal, "Pakistan sends planeload of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan", *Gulf News*, September 09, 2021. <https://gulfnews.com/world/asia/pakistan/pakistan-sends-planeload-of-humanitarian-aid-to-afghanistan-1.82142655>

RECOGNIZING AFGHANISTAN AS A CONNECTIVITY HUB

Despite being a landlocked country, the geostrategic location of Afghanistan puts it at the **cross-roads of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East**. Several agreements of multi-billion dollar projects have been signed and a number of projects are waiting to be launched, where Afghanistan acts as a jugular vein and Pakistan supports all of those connectivity projects. Some of the agreed projects are outlined as the Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement, and the Afghanistan-Kazakhstan-Pakistan-Tajikistan Transit Trade Agreement; the Central Asia-South Asia Power Project (signed between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Afghanistan and Pakistan), and the Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India gas pipeline project; and the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Tajikistan railway line project, and China-Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Iran railway line project.

As soon as peace prevails in Afghanistan, China would like to conjoin the flagship project i.e. the **China-Pakistan Economic Corridor** (CPEC) with its China-Central and Western Asia Economic Corridor.²¹ More recently, Taliban spokesperson Zabiullah Mujahid expressed the group's desire to be part of the CPEC.²² Moreover, Pakistan has transformed its vision from **geopolitics to geo-economics** that mostly focus on socio-economic progress, developmental partnership, and peace within its neighborhood. Therefore, these possible developments

are seen as strengthening people-to-people, business-to-business, and government-to-government relations, which collectively will lead to maximum connectivity, peace, and prosperity both in Afghanistan and Pakistan as well as in the region as a **shared destiny**.

RESPONSE TO THE SECURITY CHALLENGES FROM AFGHAN SOIL

On the security front, compared to other immediate neighboring countries of Afghanistan, Pakistan has largely suffered from the events that took place in Afghanistan. The entire era of the Cold War, Soviet occupation and its long war in Afghanistan (1979-1989), and the American military campaign in Afghanistan (2001-2021) facilitated a direct threat to the territorial integrity and national security of Pakistan. During the mentioned period, Pakistan had to face a dramatic increase in the momentum of insurgency movements; activities of terrorist organizations; the role of hostile intelligence agencies; and the smuggling of arms, narcotics, and drugs from Afghan soil. Further, both Soviet and US-supported Afghan governments always remained hostile to Pakistan and supported every effort to destabilize Pakistan on behalf of their facilitators.

In this scenario, the Indian factor always remained critical for Pakistan, because it was part of the Soviet's Warsaw Pact and now the closest ally of the US in the region. Therefore, it engaged Pakistan on both the **Eastern and Western borders** at the same time. As a result, Pakistan had to launch multiple security operations for eradicating the menace of terrorism from inside Pakistan and refrained from violating the sovereignty of Afghanistan with undue

21 Amina Khan, Awais Ali Syed and Mohib Afridi, "Afghanistan and Regional Connectivity", *Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad*, August 06, 2019, http://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/IB_Amina_and_Awais_Ali_and_Mohib-Afridi_Aug_6_2019.pdf

22 Muhammad Ishtiaq, "Pakistan welcomes Afghan Taliban's interest in being part of China's economic corridor projects", *Arab News*, September 06, 2021. <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/1923866/pakistan>

patience. Therefore, the **policy of restraint** came at a great cost for Pakistan, where it lost the lives of over 80,000 Pakistanis and more than US\$150 billion just in terms of infrastructural damage. Despite this loss, the problem remained active in Afghanistan, where the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the Baluchistan Liberation Army (BLA), and the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP) still have the capacity to launch attacks on Pakistan.²³ With the Taliban giving assurances that Afghan soil will not be used against any country, a possible coordinated approach in security matters may keep the region terror-free. For translating this vision, the Director-General of the **Inter-Services Intelligence** (ISI) of Pakistan hosted a virtual meeting of the intelligence chiefs of Russia, China, Tajikistan, and Iran on September 11, 2021, for building a **collective response and strategy** to address the security concerns of neighboring and regional countries in Afghanistan.²⁴

During the 1990s, Pakistan was among the three countries that recognized the government of the Taliban. Even, the current interim government in Afghanistan almost has the same leadership in 2021. So, it is easy for Pakistan to coordinate at a bilateral level and build the capacity of

the new administration to eliminate the security threats that not only threaten Pakistan but also other neighboring and regional countries.

CONCLUSION

The foreign forces have left the country, but the unsettled political and economic situation of Afghanistan is still in limbo. The ongoing situation in Afghanistan compelled Pakistan to play a leading role in the evacuation, humanitarian assistance, intra-Afghan reconciliation, and building a regional consensus on several issues pertaining to the peace, security, and economic conditions of Afghanistan. It adopted a very practical approach towards recognizing the new realities in Afghanistan and worked with the neighboring and regional countries to adopt a coordinated approach and prevent Afghanistan from experiencing isolation, economic meltdown, chaos, civil war, and an exodus of refugees. Despite the Taliban setting up an interim government, Pakistan's top political, diplomatic and defense leadership is in contact with all relevant stakeholders and continues its constructive efforts for putting pressure on the Taliban leadership to establish an inclusive, representative, and moderate future political set up for lasting peace and stability in Afghanistan. The hope is that the ongoing constructive and coordinated efforts will deliver peace in the country, which will further lead to development and reconstruction in Afghanistan and enhance economic integration as well as maximize connectivity in the region as a shared destiny.

23 Mariana Baabar, "Pakistan, China to axe terror together: RAW, NDS behind Dasu terror attack", *The News*, August 13, 2021. <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/877392-pakistan-china-to-axe-terror-together-slug-raw-nds-behind-dasu-terror-attack>

"India sponsored terrorism, invested \$3bn in Afghanistan to destabilize Pakistan", *The Express Tribune*, September 11, 2021. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2319710/india-sponsored-terrorism-invested-3b-in-afghanistan-to-destabilise-pakistan>

24 "Pakistan hosts virtual meeting of intelligence chiefs from 4 countries", *Business Recorder*, September 11, 2021. <https://www.brecorder.com/news/40119577>

PAKISTAN'S RESPONSE TO THE CURRENT SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN AN ASSESSMENT?

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From day one, Pakistan did not favor the war in Afghanistan but underscored the significance of negotiations as an ultimate solution to the problem. Even during the American military campaign in Afghanistan, its diplomatic discourse also refrained from choosing favorites in Afghanistan. On the security front, compared to other immediate neighboring countries of Afghanistan, Pakistan has largely suffered from the events that took place in Afghanistan. Despite facing many security challenges from Afghan soil, it has maintained its respect for the **sovereignty and territorial integrity** of Afghanistan. With regard to its constructive efforts for supporting the peace process in Afghanistan, Pakistan has always supported all international forums geared towards introducing enduring peace, political stability, and sustainable economic development in Afghanistan. It adopted the policy of supporting an **Afghan-led and Afghan-owned** peace process. Further, it wholeheartedly recognizes the ethnic diversity of Afghanistan and wants to see an independent, sovereign, peaceful, prosperous, and stable Afghanistan since that is in the best interest of Pakistan. Now, Afghans have a **historic opportunity** to decide their future and neighboring countries must help them by recognizing the new realities emerging in Afghanistan. Regarding development assistance and humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, Pakistan has always remained at the forefront. It has opened its borders, ports, and air corridors for the international community to send their humanitarian aid packages not only for Afghans but also for Afghan refugees living in the neighboring countries.

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