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Afghanistan and Pakistan - Five Years After the Taliban Takeover

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Introduction

On 15 August 2021 when the Taliban took over Kabul, the statements that came from the most relevant leaders and actors projected divergent perspectives and interests. The Afghan Taliban Spokesperson in Doha said "Thanks to God, the war is over in the country"[2]. Afghanistan's fleeing President Ashraf Ghani declared "The Taliban have won with the judgement of their swords and guns…."[3]. The US President Joe Biden justified the US/NATO withdrawal saying "American troops cannot and should not be fighting in a war and dying in a war that Afghan forces are not willing to fight for themselves"[4]. Imran Khan then Prime Minister of Pakistan at an official launch event said "Afghanistan has broken the shackles of slavery"[5].

A couple of weeks later in the beginning of September 2021, off the cuff remarks that "Don't worry, everything will be okay" by Pakistan's then Director General ISI Lt. Gen Faiz Hameed[6] on a visit to Kabul not only became globally viral but also led to a contentious debate about the change and the underlying geopolitics in the region.

Five years on, interestingly, today many crucial questions continue to linger about the long-term peace and stability in Afghanistan, including, the nature of the future state/system in Afghanistan; the impact of the Afghan developments on peace and security in Pakistan and the region; and the direction of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations.

The Taliban have strengthened their regime in Afghanistan by consolidating their control over Afghan institutions and subsiding the violence. They have, however, not shown an inclination or made a reasonable progress towards moving to an inclusive system in the country, building human rights-based governance embracing the rights/opportunities for women and marginalized groups and

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[2] Axios, Jenifer Koons, "The Taliban declare victory in Afghanistan", 16 August 2021, https://www.axios.com/2021/08/16/taliban-takes-kabul-afghanistan-victory (widely reported)

[3] Bangkok Post, News Report, "Taliban in control of Afghanistan, Panic in Kabul", 16 August 2021, https://www.bangkokpost.com/world/2165995/taliban-in-control-of-afghanistan-panic-in-kabul (Facebook statement of former President; widely reported)

[4] Remarks by President Biden on Afghanistan, 16 August 2021, https://nato.usmission.gov/remarks-by-president-biden-on-afghanistan/ (widely reported)

[5] Geo News, "Afghanistan has broken shackles of slavery: PM Imran Khan, 16 August 2021, https://www.geo.tv/latest/365546-afghanistan-has-broken-shackles-of-slavery-pm-imran-khan (widely reported)

[6] Dawn, Naveed Siddiqui, "Don't worry, everything will be okay: ISI chief during Kabul visit", 4 September 2021, https://www.dawn.com/news/1644463 (widely reported)

rendering effective cooperation against regional and international terrorism.

Though the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan has not been recognized internationally, the Taliban's Afghan interim Government has continued to expand its engagement with the countries in the region and beyond. Afghanistan-Pakistan relations have continued to progressively deteriorate reaching a stage where presently the two countries have zero engagement, increasingly fierce TTP and BLA terrorist attacks in Pakistan, retaliatory military strikes by Pakistan in Afghanistan and closure of border since October 2025 with no trade, transit and people to people movements. This arguably is the most challenging phase in bilateral relations in the past almost eight decades.

The most striking reality is that even after the Taliban takeover, the relations between the states of Afghanistan and Pakistan have continued to be a function of global and regional geopolitics remaining oblivious to the rich civilizational bonds historically connecting Pakistan, Afghanistan, Central Asia and the wider region. For moving the region out of the past decades marked by instability, polarization and confrontation, this paradigm has to change.

Implications of the August 15 Change

The Taliban takeover in 2021 was not just a change of regime in Afghanistan; it was a major development signifying a unique opportunity for steering the region out of an era of decades-long war, conflict and turmoil in Afghanistan that began with the overthrow of King Zahir Shah half a century ago. During these five decades, Afghanistan had to tread through bloody palace coups in 1970s, Jihad against Soviet occupation from 1979 to 1989, Mujahideen's factional government and civil war in the first half of 1990s, the first Taliban regressive rule in the second half of 1990s and then 20 years of the US/NATO intervention in Afghanistan.

Pakistan's relations with Afghanistan and especially over 2,600 km long border between the two countries inhabited on both sides by around 50 million Pashtuns becoming an eternal theater of militancy, insurgency and terrorism have also suffered intensely and extensively during this perpetual Afghan conflict. The relations, movements and exchanges between these people living on either side of the border having tribal, familial and cultural linkages have been heavily scarred due to an endless cycle of instability and violence.

The relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan's non-Pushtun population also came under huge stress

during the prolonged Afghan conflict. While under late Gen. Zia ul Haq in 1980s Pakistan had supported both Pushtun and non-Pushtun groups equally during the Afghan Jihad against Soviet occupation forces, ironically Pakistan and coalition of several Afghan non-Pushtun leaders remained pitted against each other in 1990s and later when Northern Alliance factions came into power in a two decades-long US-NATO supported governments in Afghanistan, the mistrust between Afghanistan and Pakistan became a significant feature in the state-to-state relations.

In this backdrop, people of Afghanistan and Pakistan had associated high expectations with Doha peace agreement to yield an intra-Afghan political settlement towards achieving a stable Afghanistan with an inclusive and participative governance structure and putting Afghanistan-Pakistan relations back on the track of civilizational engagement and stability. Masoom Staknzai, former Afghan NSA and chief of intelligence and a key negotiator in Doha negotiations acknowledged "Between ouster of Taliban in 2001 and their return to power in 2021, several opportunities to nurture a successful peace process in Afghanistan were missed"[7].

Even after the Taliban had assumed power exclusively in Kabul, the people in both countries as well as the international community were hopeful that Afghanistan and Pakistan will work out their relations by bringing an end to cross-border terrorism and militancy by the elements like TTP and BLA and creating a facilitative border management to promote, trade, transit, economic cooperation and people to people movements.

However, these hopes and expectations were shattered and, after five years of the Taliban takeover challenges in the post-US Afghanistan and Afghanistan-Pakistan engagement are more serious than these were in August 2021. Though violence in Afghanistan has gone down because prior to 2021 much of it was due to the Afghan Taliban's insurgency against the then governments, most analysts and observers would agree that it cannot be equated with durable or permanent peace and stability in Afghanistan[8]. The situation will continue to remain fragile unless the essential ingredients for lasting peace and stability are provided in a holistic manner.

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[7] Masoom Stanikzai, "Missed Opportunities and Obstacles in the Afghan Peace Process", The center for Study of Global Human Movement, University of Cambridge, https://www.humanmovement.cam.ac.uk/missed-opportunities-and-obstacles-afghan-peace-process-m-masoom-stanekzai

[8] Graeme Smith, International Crisis Group, "Afghanistan Three Years after the Taliban Takeover", 14 August 2024, https://www.crisisgroup.org/qna/asia-pacific/afghanistan/afghanistan-three-years-after-taliban-takeover (shared assessments of several experts and scholars)

The question of inclusivity in Afghanistan also remains unaddressed. The Afghan Taliban are adamant[9] that their rule in Afghanistan will be exclusive and for an indefinite period. They have avoided drafting a constitutional framework for ensuring distribution of powers, fixing of tenure, developing institutional mechanisms, accountability framework and limiting of tenures. The powers remain centralized in Taliban Emir Hebatullah Akhundzada[10] and his close advisors with no restrictions while most of the senior leaders are still in the UN-sanctions list.

The most unexpected of the developments has been unprecedented deterioration in the relations between Taliban's Afghan Interim Government and Pakistan. Kabul and Islamabad have moved farther than they were in August 2021. Border and bilateral channels are closed. Citing cross-border terrorism by TTP and BLA, Pakistan has carried out more military strikes in Afghanistan than ever in the past. The efforts for facilitation and mediation by the friendly countries have also failed to produce a meaningful engagement to end this stalemate.

Cross-Border Terrorism

During the past five years, counterterrorism has assumed even greater central focus in the regional discourse on peace, stability and connectivity due to phenomenal increase in cross-border terrorism particularly on Afghanistan-Pakistan border. The perspectives on the terrorist groups footprint in Afghanistan and the need for counter-terrorism cooperation has distinct shades.

The reports of the United Nations and the relevant institutions from the global actors such as the US, China, Russia, EU and the regional countries continue to decisively confirm the presence of large number of terrorist groups on the Afghan soil including ISKP (Daesh), Al-Qaeda, TTP, BLA, ETIM, IMU, Jaishul Adl and their affiliate[11]. Since these reports indicate presence and distribution of these groups on borders of Afghanistan's various neighbours, security challenges and counter-terrorism cooperation continue to be a core agenda of Afghanistan's dialogue with its neighbours, regional partners and other countries who are engaging with Afghanistan.

[9] Based on personal interaction with the Taliban figures (several scholarly assessments also support)
[10] Philip Acey, geopolitical Monitor, "Why the Taliban Government is likely Here to Stay", Situation Reports, 27 December 2025, https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/why-the-taliban-government-is-likely-here-to-stay/ (widely shared assessment inside and outside Afghanistan)
[11] Successive UNSC monitoring teams reports and reports of intelligence and security institutions of various countries confirm this assertion

The US and its western allies following the withdrawal from Afghanistan have adopted an approach of monitoring the situation of terrorism and political developments in Afghanistan from a distance. The US is not formally engaging with the Afghan Interim Government, and its practical contacts are mostly through Qatar. The EU also has no accreditation but only a low-level humanitarian mission in Afghanistan. However, the US and Western countries shave continued to allow the flow of humanitarian assistance to the tune of $ 1.7 to 2 billion annually to Afghanistan through the UN channels to avert any large-scale humanitarian catastrophe or melt down of the Afghan state[12].

Pakistan's concerns have been mounting with regard to the TTP and BLA finding safe havens in Afghanistan and their cross-border activities leading to incessant terrorist attacks in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan and other parts of Pakistan[13]. It was shocking for Pakistan that after the Taliban taking control of Afghanistan, contrary to expectations, the terrorism-related violence in Pakistan surged in a significant manner. Since 2021, over 10,000 civilians and security personnel[14] have lost their lives in Pakistan in terrorist and militant activities.

To make things worse, Pakistan's efforts to resolve the TTP issue through bilateral channels have not yielded desired results because of the strength of ideological and logistical nexus between the Afghan Taliban and the TTP. Pakistan has not been satisfied with the Afghan Taliban's explanations that this is Pakistan's internal issue and should be resolved through dialogue between Pakistan and the TTP like the Afghan Taliban had negotiated the Doha peace agreement with the US. The Afghan Taliban-facilitated agreement between Pakistan and the TTP in 2022 could survive barely a few months after which the TTP has unleashed a full-blown campaign and terrorism in the country[15]. Subsequently the wave of terrorism in Pakistan from 2023 to date has grossly intensified.

While this aggravating challenge of cross-border dimensions of terrorism has been contributing to significant loss of life in Pakistan, the bilateral channels of engagement between security, intelligence and counterterrorism of the two countries have been inconsistent and devoid of meaningful cooperation

[12] Siyar Sirat, Amu TV, "UN Says its deliver $1.7 billion in assistance to Afghanistan in 2025", 20 April 2026, https://amu.tv/235795/

[13] Kashif Imran, Arab News, "UN says Taliban support fuelled deadly attacks in Pakistan in last six months", 13 August 2026, https://www.arabnews.pk/node/2654474/pakistan

[14] Compiled figures from Pakistan Institute of Conflict and Security Studies (PICSS) released figures. The Center for Regional and Security Studies (CRSS) figures also closely match with this data

[15] Author was based in Kabul and closely watched the related developments

and collaboration. During past one year or so Pakistan's reaction has culminated from using pressure through leverages to an exclusive military strategy against the TTP and BLA shelters and camps in Afghanistan and freezing of diplomatic relations, trade and border crossings with Afghanistan.

During the presence of the US and NATO forces in Afghanistan, Pakistan had been raising its concerns with Afghan governments and the major powers including the United States, China and Russia as well as the United Nations regarding its intelligence assessments of Indian involvement in supporting terrorist groups including the TTP, BLA and their affiliates and commanders on the Afghan soil. After a brief interlude following the Taliban takeover, the increasing divide between Pakistan and Afghan Taliban in recent years particularly the freeze in the relations since October 2025 has created space for warming between India and Afghanistan against Pakistan's. A grim reality remains that if Afghanistan-Pakistan relations continue on the current trajectory, opportunities for Indian involvement in Afghanistan will further grow, which ostensibly will be contrary to Pakistan's interests.

Interestingly, during this period Afghanistan's other neighbours and regional countries have been following an approach of cautious engagement with the Afghan Taliban regime with primary focus on ensuring stability in relations. China has kept close engagement with the Afghan Taliban premised on no interference in internal or ideological matters while persuading the authorities to render close counterterrorism cooperation especially on ETIM. China has also continued its efforts to use the trilateral China-Afghanistan-Pakistan initiative for seeking avenues of rapprochement between Afghanistan and Pakistan for reviving a bilateral dialogue to eliminate cross-border terrorism and deepen economic engagement. However, China's Urumqi dialogue has so far not succeeded in narrowing down differences between Afghanistan and Pakistan and revive their bilateral engagement channels[16].

The Central Asian countries who had remained engaged in a fierce struggle with the Afghan Taliban during their first stint in 1990s have adopted a new approach rooted in smooth engagement with the Afghan Taliban government to build economic linkages to create stakes that become harbinger of mutually assured security[17]. Uzbekistan is at the forefront of developing such consensus in Central

[16] Durdana Najam, Express News, "Urumqi Talks and the hard truth about Afghanistan", 11 April 2026, https://tribune.com.pk/story/2602084/urumqi-talks-and-the-hard-truth-about-afghanistanhttps://tribune.com.pk/story/2602084/urumqi-talks-and-the-hard-truth-about-afghanistan

[17] Giorgio Cafiero, World Politics Review, "Central Asia Has Learned to Live With the Taliban", 11 August 2026, https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/central-asia-afghanistan-taliban-normalization/?share-code=ywexHReEQswE

Asia[18] and its success in crushing IMU's capabilities to undertake terrorism in the region is a key factor behind such approach[19]. There are also indications that Tajikistan, a country having a volatile border with Afghanistan and deeply concerned at Afghan Taliban's military operations against Afghanistan's Tajik leaders, is also considering conciliatory approaches with the Taliban[20]. Midst these developments, the Central Asian countries remain wary of the Taliban's rigid stance on terrorism-related issues and their widening gulf with Pakistan.

Economic Interaction and Regional Connectivity

For past more than a century, the wider region comprising West Asia, Central Asia and South Asia has been amongst the least connected and economically integrated of the regions in the world. With around 2 billion population and a collective GDP of over $ 5.5 trillion, the region has immense potential to evolve and strengthen trade, transit, infrastructure, energy and logistical connectivity for promoting shared prosperity in the region. While the other regions such as Europe and Southeast Asia in past decades adopted approaches to benefit from the phenomena of globalization by promoting intra-regional and inter-regional trade and business-friendly interactions, the geo-politics, conflicts, disputes and mistrust have kept the regions of West Asia, Central Asia and South Asia divided and isolated from each other despite their centuries-old civilizational bonds.

Afghanistan and Pakistan are vital links for promoting connectivity and economic integration of the entire region especially between Central Asia and South Asia. Durable peace and stability in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and in their relations, is an important precursor for advancing the vision for a region connected with each other and offering opportunities for shared prosperity for all the countries. Continuing armed conflict in Afghanistan for almost past five decades has been an impediment in developing credible infrastructure for promoting cross-border trade, transit and economic exchanges that in turn can expedite trans-Afghanistan regional connectivity projects including energy and transport corridors for meaningful business promotion and economic cooperation.

The withdrawal of the US and NATO troops in August 2021 had created a genuine opportunity for addressing the roots of an internecine conflict in Afghanistan and building an environment of mutual

[18] Niginakhon Saida, The Diplomat, "Uzbekistan's Afghanistan Push Accelerates", 3 March 2026, https://thediplomat.com/2026/03/uzbekistans-afghanistan-push-accelerates/
[19] Based on personal interaction with security and counter-terrorism experts in the region
[20] Hekmatullah Zaland, The Diplomat, "Why is Tajikistan Recalibrating its Approach toward the Taliban", 20 November 2025, https://thediplomat.com/2025/11/why-is-tajikistan-recalibrating-its-approach-toward-the-taliban/

trust between Afghanistan and Pakistan as a launchpad for promoting regional cohesion. Although Doha peace process did not yield an expected intra-Afghan political settlement, during the first six months after the takeover the international community and donors were engaging constructively with the Afghan Interim Government in the hope that the Taliban would in due course take measures towards inclusivity, respect for human rights and cooperation in the field of counterterrorism. The expectation was that progress in this direction would gradually pave the way for Taliban's government recognition in the international community[21].

However, by the beginning of 2022, the developments on ground in Afghanistan took a different turn and have continued to aggravate since then. Regressive measures such as banning girls from schools and higher education, curbs on media freedoms have increased international community's disappointment over the Taliban's rule and governance methods. The divide with Pakistan on Afghan Taliban's support for the TTP and BLA has continued to expand and widen with increasing acts of terrorism and fatalities in Pakistan. On 12 October 2025, the Government of Pakistan suspended all its official engagement with Afghanistan and closed the entire border for trade, transit and movement of people.

The disengagement and closure of border has immense negative implications for Afghanistan, Pakistan and the region. For Afghanistan, Pakistan's ports have always been a preferred and the most economical transit route for channeling its exports and imports. Re-routing its exports and imports through alternate transit routes has been causing logistical difficulties and extra costs to the Afghan government and the traders. Consequently, in addition to the shortages, costs of commodities and essential items in the Afghan markets have registered higher prices[22].

Due to the closure of trade and transit through Afghanistan-Pakistan border, the traders and businesses in Pakistan are also incurring substantial economic losses estimated to the tune of Rs. 50 billion per month. At this rate the total trade loss for past over 300 days of border closure can be interpolated to $ 1.7 billion mainly to pharmaceuticals, food commodities, textile products and machinery items. Adding the losses made by transporters, trucking industry and the labourers losing their daily work incomes, the total losses so far exceed $ 2-3 billion. Combined annual economic losses for both

[21] Based on discussions while serving as Ambassador of Pakistan in Kabul in 2021-22
[22] Afghanistan International, "Afghanistan Faces Trade Crisis due to Pak Border Closure", 25 May 2026, https://www.afintl.com/en/202605256885

countries due to the border closure should be $ 4-5 billion[23].

Pakistan-Afghanistan border areas have special social and cultural dynamics. People living on both sides of the border require frequent cross-border movements due to familial contacts and economic or business purposes. Many Afghans in provinces nearby Pakistani border have been historically travelling to Pakistani cities for medical treatment, educational purposes and business interests. The current freeze in relations and borders is seriously affecting the lives of these peoples which also contributes to aggravating anti-Pakistan sentiments in Afghanistan.

In addition, a number of mega-connectivity projects in infrastructure, energy pipelines and transportation and logistics corridors have remained on the shelf for past 2-3 decades. Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline project was conceived in mid-1990s to export gas from Turkmenistan's Galkynysh to the town of Fazilka in Indian Punjab and has not made any progress beyond Turkmenistan's borders. Central Asia South Asia (CASA-1000) project for transmission of electric power from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Afghanistan and Pakistan has not made progress despite its high feasibility.

The trilateral project to lay down a 700 km long railway line from Termez in Uzbekistan to Mazar Sharif and Logar in Afghanistan to cross into Pakistan through Kharachi border conceived in 2018 has also been faced with considerable delays even in its feasibility and preparatory work which are further exacerbated by current conflict[24]. Incidentally, the alternate trans-Afghan connectivity routes - the transit route through Iran's Chabahar Port or the Lapiz Lazuli transport corridor aimed at connecting Afghanistan to Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkiye have also not been operationalized.

Owing to its focus on trade and economic exchanges, Uzbekistan's trade with Afghanistan has increased to $ 2 billion mark and the two countries have fixed a target to increase it to $ 5 billion in the coming years[25]. Uzbekistan has launched special initiatives for giving a boost to efforts for trans-Afghan regional connectivity projects and enhance trade and economic cooperation with Afghanistan as a means to promote durable regional peace and stability. On its border with Afghanistan in the Uzbek town of Termez, Government of Uzbekistan has established a special visa-free enclave

[23] Losses estimated in consultation with Afghan and Pakistan firms and business persons
[24] Arman Sidhu, GeoPolitical Monitor, "Off the Rails: Trans-afghan Corridor Plagued by Afghan-Pak Conflict", 28 July 2026, https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/off-the-rails-trans-afghan-corridor-plagued-by-afghan-pak-conflict/
[25] Sohrab Sarwari, Pajhwok News, "afghan-Uzbek trade volume surges to $ 2 billion as ties deepen", 27 July 2026, https://pajhwok.com/2026/07/27/afghan-uzbek-trade-volume-surges-to-nearly-2bn-as-ties-deepen/#google_vignette

'Airitom'[26] for stay of Afghan nationals for 15 days for medical treatment, shopping and business purposes. For more than a decade now, the railways is already operational between Uzbekistan and the town of Mazar Sharif in northern Afghanistan.

Termez Dialogue has also been initiated as an annual forum for thinktank discussions on the ways to promote regional connectivity between Central Asia and South Asia. Under Termez Dialogue, Uzbekistan has already hosted two sessions (2025 and 2026)[27] bringing politicians, intellectuals and researchers from the region and beyond to discuss and explore the ways to overcome impediments to the regional connectivity and economic integration. In June 2026, Kabul hosted a brainstorming session with thinktanks from five Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan) and Azerbaijan for discussions on advancing the regional economic cooperation and connectivity[28].

Rebuilding Afghanistan-Pakistan Engagement

Afghanistan-Pakistan relations are in a crisis. But as the famous adage goes, "Never let a good crisis go to waste". This crisis in bilateral relations provides an opportunity to the two countries and their leadership to restore the fraternal ties and develop a vision for the future.

The solution to the most complex and complicated problems lies in returning to, and restoring, the fundamentals. Afghanistan-Pakistan relations are not an exception. While the historical baggage of past several decades has progressively eroded trust, understanding and cooperation in bilateral relations, the relations in the past 2-3 years have touched their lowest ebb in past several decades which is contrary to the interest of both countries and their peoples.

In order to come out of the current unenviable phase, the two sides have to seriously explore the ways to rediscover and revive the fundamentals in bilateral relations. These include: (a) paying attention to the civilizational and people to people dimensions in the relations; (b) addressing deep-rooted mistrust and appropriately instill mutual respect in the relations; and (c) building the relations on the foundation of a strong state to state relationship.

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[26] Personally visited Airitom and participated in Termez Dialogue in May 2025
[27] Participated in both sessions of Termez Dialogue
[28] Kazakhstan Institute of Strategic Studies, "KazISS Director Made a Speech at Afghanistan and Central Asia Think Tank Forum", 16 June, 2026, https://kisi.kz/en/kaziss-director-made-a-speech-at-the-afghanistan-and-central-asia-think-tank-forum/

Based on the experience of past five years, the Afghan Interim Government (read Afghan Taliban) have to be cognizant to Pakistan's genuine peace and security needs and that any thinking regarding the use or export of the Taliban ideology to Pakistan has to be avoided. This is a minimum pre-requisite for building a strong Afghanistan-Pakistan relationship as well as a commitment which the Afghan Taliban also gave to the international community in Doha Peace Agreement. The Afghanistan-Pakistan border region remaining in a mode of perpetual insurgency, militancy and terrorism is against the interests of both nations.

The Government of Pakistan on the other hand has to effectively transform its approach from security-based to a political-based engagement. The exclusive security or kinetic approach has limitations. Such an approach should ensure effective management of the border that facilitates civilizational contacts through documented movement of people in view of their close tribal, social and economic interaction. Similarly, the trade, transit and business/economic exchanges across the border have to be supported by both sides. The sensitive issues such as repatriation of refugees can also be managed according to the ground realities and in a dignified and mutually coordinated manner.

Moving the relations from a geopolitical to a civilizational spectrum would signify that Afghanistan-Pakistan engagement has to be built in three tiers:

I. Initiate the political level engagement between the two governments (Prime Minister or Foreign Minister level) to prepare grounds to develop and deepen mutual understanding to promote stable bilateral relations that can evolve with time to strengthen trust, address each other's concerns in security, economic and people to people areas and promote shared interests.
II. Evolve institutional cooperation on management of the entire border to prevent cross-border terrorism as well as facilitate economic interaction and peoples movements through border crossings in an uninterrupted manner.
III. Enhance interaction with Afghanistan and other neighbouring countries of Afghanistan and regional partners to reiterate focus on strengthening Central Asia-South Asia regional connectivity infrastructure and implement mega projects such as TAPI, CASA-1000 and trilateral railways project between Uzbekistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan by creating conditions conducive for investments.

Melting the ice and rebuilding a model of workable bilateral engagement does not necessarily need external mediation or facilitation since no other external players know the reality of Afghanistan-

Pakistan relations better than both these countries. However, in view of the difficulties being faced by the two sides in restoring the engagement, China-Pakistan-Afghanistan trilateral's Urumqi initiative can be appropriately relied upon for this purpose, if needed. China has been constructively engaged with both countries for normalizing their engagement and a push in this process can make a meaningful headway.

The above paragraphs in this section suggest a pragmatic and practically workable way the two countries can adopt to relieve the prevailing level of stress in bilateral relations and move forward to a much-needed engagement as per aspirations of their peoples.

Conclusion

The shifting geopolitical order is fueling instability and turmoil at global and regional levels. Russia-Ukraine war continuing indecisively for past five years has rendered implications ranging from trans-atlantic relations to economic repercussions relating to oil and commodity supplies. The US-Israel-Iran war since 28 February 2026 has jolted the entire global and regional security infrastructure particularly in Middle East and West Asia. These wars *inter alia* have additionally exposed the role of non-state actors and proxies as threats to states, international water/shipping channels and global and regional supply chains. New regional security mechanisms such as Pakistan-Saudi Arabia-Turkiye defence agreement are emerging to replace previous security structures.

In the fast-evolving regional situation, Pakistan and Afghanistan as two key states at the confluence of South Asia, West Asia and Central Asia should not waste time to repair, rebuild and strengthen their bilateral relations through cooperative approaches to eliminate terrorism and militant, insurgent and separatist groups. The civilizational bonds between the two countries extending to the Central Asian and Caucasian regions provide an opportunity to employ geo-economic approaches for promoting bilateral trade and transit and opening new horizons of regional connectivity from South Asia to Central Asia to Eurasia and beyond.

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