

Crossroads: Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the United States

Dialogue Snapshot Report
September 2021



the Hollings Center
for international dialogue

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From 2017 to 2019, the Hollings Center for International Dialogue hosted the Afghanistan-Pakistan Partnership Summit, a program sponsored by the U.S. Embassy in Kabul to foster business, education, and civil society connections between the two countries. Following the Doha Agreement in February 2020 and the announcement of the withdrawal of U.S. forces by mid-2021, the Center decided to continue the partnership program and discuss future policy considerations. To determine possible outcomes and the future role of the United States in Afghanistan-Pakistan relations, the Center invited American voices and opinions to join alumni of the Afghanistan-Pakistan Partnership Summit for an online dialogue program.

The dialogue was conducted over three virtual sessions during summer 2021. The first session on June 30 looked at the future of U.S.-Pakistan relations. The second session, held on July 14, evaluated the future of U.S.-Afghanistan relations. The final session, taking place on August 11, looked at the future American role in Afghanistan-Pakistan relations.

The dialogue occurred as significant events took place in Afghanistan. The changing realities for Afghans, including some of the participants, created a dialogue far different from what was initially envisioned. When the dialogue began, the Taliban offensive that began in May was largely concentrated to rural areas. Most NATO forces had already departed the country, leading to speculation on Afghanistan's long-term security. By the second meeting, more than 60 additional districts had fallen to the Taliban and several provincial capitals were actively threatened. By the final meeting in August, nine provincial capitals had fallen to the Taliban. Ghazni, Herat, and Kandahar would fall the following day. Mere days later, Taliban forces would enter Kabul, effectively taking over the country.

This dialogue snapshot report is a contemporaneous account of the shifting viewpoints and attitudes expressed by the participants as events unfolded during summer 2021. Many of the challenges and conditions discussed during the meeting remain relevant, if not more urgent than before. Although some policy suggestions may change, some remain pertinent even today.

- Participants agreed on the need for a reset in bilateral and trilateral relations. However, it became clear that the priorities of each state were too divergent and misaligned to seriously consider developing new strategic relationships. A general climate of mistrust and skepticism further prohibited such strategic discussions.
- As the dialogue progressed and the security situation in Afghanistan worsened, the focus shifted from discussions about the future to debates about each country's culpability in the current crisis. This further signaled a state of distrust and made any long-term strategic discussions infeasible.
- Participants consistently expressed uncertainty, the need for introspection, and concerns about losing decades of progress throughout the dialogue.

- Issues of mutual interest did exist between the three countries, including addressing climate change, economic investment, managing the pandemic, and assisting refugees. These issues could still be building blocks for future bilateral discussions.
- Participants concurred that regardless of security developments, it would be critical for Afghan, American, and Pakistani colleagues to continue as much engagement as possible.
- Following the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, future prospects are unclear. It is uncertain whether the United States will engage with the Taliban-controlled Afghan government following the conclusion of the American evacuation. Likewise, authorities in Pakistan have sent mixed messages about their future relationship with Afghanistan. It will likely be quite some time before a new paradigm is set.

U.S.-Pakistan Relations (June 30, 2021) — Beyond a Security Relationship?

Can the U.S.-Pakistan strategic relationship evolve beyond the security lens that has defined it for the better part of 40 years? During that time, the relationship has been defined by mutual regional security interests, specifically regarding Afghanistan. As an American participant noted at the start of the session,

“The U.S.-Pakistan relationship is at a crossroads. The optimists will say this is a great opportunity to move beyond all the tensions that Afghanistan brought to U.S.-Pak relations over the past two decades. Pessimists will say that with the U.S. leaving Afghanistan, there will be much less to build the relationship on.”

Regardless of viewpoint, redefinition will be difficult. Often, the U.S.-Pakistan relationship has been defined by “mutual skepticism,” where “bilateral trust remained missing.”

Participants noted mutual desire for a broader reset in the U.S.-Pakistan relationship, but questioned its possibility given differing priorities and limited cooperation options. From Pakistan’s perspective, foreign policy goals shifted from geopolitical security concerns to “geo-economics.” The government under Prime Minister Imran Khan already initiated regional agreements with Central Asian states, connecting trade from Uzbekistan to Pakistani ports via road networks in Afghanistan. Such agreements require a vested interest in a stable, peaceful Afghanistan.¹ Due to this, and other security and refugee concerns, one participant from Pakistan noted, “Afghanistan is at the forefront of Pakistani politics nowadays.” Pakistan would also like substantially more economic investment coming from the United States. Some participants from both countries questioned whether the U.S.-Pakistan relationship could shift from security toward commerce. For one, the situation in Afghanistan (even then) created

¹ *Imran Khan’s Geo-Economic Vision Making Way to Central Asia through Peaceful Afghanistan*, Daily Times, August 2, 2021, <https://dailytimes.com.pk/800216/imran-khans-geo-economic-vision-making-way-to-central-asia-through-peaceful-afghanistan/>.

questions about the stability of the regional investing environment. Some contended that China would be in a better investment position given its proximity and current economic influence in the country.

Further participant comments made it clear that decoupling the U.S.-Pakistani relationship from the Afghanistan crisis would be impossible at that time. As one participant noted, “I don’t think the appetite exists in Washington yet to take the relationship outside of the U.S.-Afghanistan relationship. I’m not a proponent of making the relationship hostage to Afghanistan, but this issue has to be addressed.” Part of the reason for hesitancy is that some of the American participants felt that Pakistan did not have much to offer the United States. Already seen by some as being in “China’s camp” in global powers competition, one Pakistani participant said, “Pakistan has to make itself more important and relevant to the U.S.” or risk pushing the United States toward a deeper partnership with India.



Prime Minister Imran Khan speaks at the United States Institute of Peace in 2019. Photo Credit: [USIP](#).

The discussion concluded that both countries share interest in redefining aspects of the relationship, yet each differs in methodology and holds viewpoints that are too divergent. Given Pakistan’s geopolitical position, it will remain strategically important, but perhaps not in a manner of Pakistan’s choosing. The country will be stuck attempting to exert its priorities within the influence of the U.S.-China-India triad, a balancing act that will be incredibly difficult. Without finding a sustainable pathway to change that dynamic, the United States may remain disinterested in a larger partnership beyond that of a security framework.

Participants brainstormed possibilities for U.S.-Pakistan cooperation to start improving the relationship including transactional issues and persistent diplomatic efforts. One suggestion was for the United States to act as a mediator in Pakistan-India relations. Another called on the United States to provide assistance to Pakistan on refugee issues, which are predicted to worsen following the American withdrawal from Afghanistan. Another participant suggested that the U.S. government could work on initiatives to improve Pakistan’s overall investment opportunities. Actions addressing climate change have been a policy desire expressed by both President Biden and Prime Minister Khan’s administrations. However, such cooperation seems far off. As a Pakistani participant commented, “There have not been any serious negotiations that could define the future face of bilateral ties under the new [American] administration.” The potential of the relationship may require time and investment from civil society and other non-governmental actors.

U.S.-Afghanistan Relations (July 14, 2021) — Basis for a Relationship?



Then-President Ghani and Chairman Abdullah meet President Biden at the White House on June 25, 2021. The meeting discussed continued support to Afghanistan before the final withdrawal deadline. Source: [The White House](#).

As the second session opened, several discouraging developments took place from the Taliban offensive begun in May 2021. In addition to capturing dozens of rural districts, the insurgency began pressuring several provincial capitals. In the week prior to this session, three major border crossings with Turkmenistan, Iran, and Pakistan had been seized by the Taliban², calling the Afghan government's ability to provide security into further question. Hopes for a political solution had stalled. Although the tenor and tone of the dialogue session started to sound more urgent and the prospects for protracted civil conflict more likely, there was no expectation of imminent collapse of the Afghan government—at least not in the major cities. The

meeting proceeded under the then commonly held assumption that the government of Afghanistan would persist for at least several months, perhaps longer.

A question by an American participant framed the entire session: “What is the basis of the relationship between the U.S. and Afghanistan?” When discussing U.S.-Afghanistan relations in July, the participants painted a picture of misaligned perceptions and poor understanding of each side's intent. Following the announcement of the withdrawal of U.S. forces, the administration committed to funding the Afghan security forces and the diplomatic enforcement of a political settlement. An Afghan participant openly questioned the sustainability of such an arrangement. “Given the Taliban's recent territorial gains, there are doubts that security forces [will] continue surrendering to the Taliban. What will continued funding accomplish?” He furthered that attention by the United States should instead be given to decreasing violence, forcing the Taliban and the Afghan government to settle and engaging in deradicalization activities. Without putting time and attention on those factors, the participant feared of a “red-line” moment for the United States, when the situation would deteriorate to a point when American intervention would be necessary.

The American perspective displayed a much narrower view on future relations with Afghanistan, as America's attention turned toward other internal and external threats. De-prioritization of the issues and concerns that once dominated the U.S.-Afghan relationship was apparent in some

² *Taliban Capture Key Afghanistan Border Crossings*, BBC News, July 9, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-57773120>; Abdul Qadir Sediqi and Orooj Hakimi, *Afghan Taliban Seize Border Crossing with Pakistan in Major Advance*, Reuters, July 14, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/taliban-claims-control-key-afghan-border-crossing-with-pakistan-2021-07-14/>.

comments. “The U.S. is focusing on different threats. The first is COVID. On top of that, economic and political issues that the U.S. is dealing with are demanding greater attention than Afghanistan.” That is not to say that the United States lacked concern about abuses of human rights, setbacks to women’s rights progress, and repression of press freedoms, but rather that priority shifted to other international and domestic concerns. The future of U.S.-Afghanistan relations now factored into the equation of great power competition, specifically with China and Russia. On multiple occasions, American participants framed future Afghanistan stability and counterterrorism operations into a regional and not bilateral lens. “A stable Afghanistan is in everyone’s interest. The common denominator for Pakistan, Iran, China, and India is stability.”

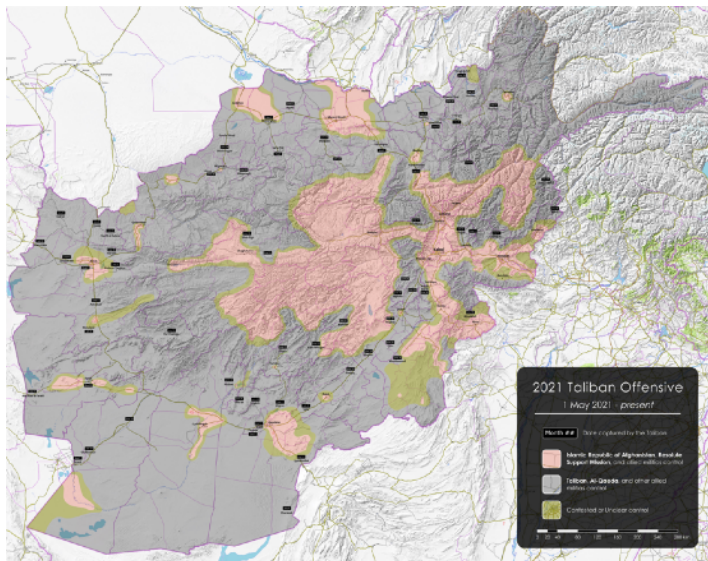
The misalignment of policies and interests led to a decline in trust that was exacerbated by the deteriorating security situation of mid-July 2021. As one Afghan participant noted, “Afghans feel that their state and government have not been dealt with as a partner in terms of U.S.-Afghan relations. The only people that have no say in this war is Afghans themselves.” The comment referred specifically to the February 2020 Doha Agreement between the United States and the Taliban to which the government of Afghanistan was not a party. Participants from both countries echoed how the deal had soured both official and personal relationships, and made any kind of strategic relationship more difficult. One noted, “On the Afghan side there is a sense of abandonment. All of this does not lead to a strategic relationship.”

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The session offered no clear pathway forward for a strategic relationship. Some offered suggestions, such as increased diplomatic efforts and funding until the “dust settles.” One Afghan participant stated, “The one thing we cannot take our eyes off of is to focus on the institutions we have built over the past 20 years. These institutions require reinforcement and resourcing, and this is a huge challenge.” An American participant replied, “American aid is going to be the foundation upon which the Afghan state rests until another international donor steps in.” How long American aid would persist was unclear, and some questioned whether the aid would or should continue. “There is no political constituency for Afghans or Afghanistan in the U.S.,” said one American participant. Maintaining aid beyond what was already committed would require significant public pressure on Congress and the Biden administration.

Throughout the session, participants from Afghanistan shared dire information that alluded to the crisis and collapse one month later. One Afghan with significant contacts in provincial areas under Taliban control noted that areas fell with little resistance and mass surrenders of government forces. An American warned that in seized areas, the Taliban and other extremists used seized American-made equipment. Another participant relayed how the Taliban was executing a fear-based propaganda campaign in captured areas. “The scope of violence is not confined to districts, it is spreading throughout the country, causing polarization on social media.” All these statements foreshadowed the crisis yet to come.

The U.S. Role in Afghanistan-Pakistan Relations (August 11, 2021) — A Question of Responsibility



The state of the Taliban offensive at the start of the final session on August 11. The security situation in the country had rapidly deteriorated, although the Afghan government still controlled most major cities. That would change mere hours after the session's conclusion. Map Credit: [Rr016, Wikimedia Commons](#).

By the time of the final session, the situation in Afghanistan had deteriorated significantly. Over the previous four days, the Taliban had seized nine provincial capitals, the largest being Kunduz.³ Additionally, several more border crossings had fallen to Taliban control. Ghazni, Herat, and Kandahar were effectively encircled. The situation on the ground was already negatively impacting Afghanistan-Pakistan relations. The previous weekend, the hashtag *#SanctionPakistan* began trending on Twitter⁴, signaling a low point in popular sentiment by Afghans toward Pakistan.

The final session opened in this climate of crisis and hostility. The question was not whether Afghanistan-Pakistan relations would be severely

strained, but whether the United States could even play a role in helping to stabilize those relations. Due to the lack of clarity on the outcome of the military and human security crisis, the participants focused more on past issues than future possibilities. Some participants even grappled with the question over which country held the most responsibility for the current crisis. As one participant surmised, “This ownership dilemma needs to be resolved once and for all.” Most instead took defensive positions, while some did offer shared culpability.

Along those lines, the discussion gravitated toward the fault-assigning question of “Who legitimized the Taliban?” Participants were not shy in relaying their opinions. From the perspective of several Afghans at the meeting, the sentiment of abandonment by all in the international community was palpable. One said, “There is an understanding that what Afghans are going through is not being understood by the region. How we see the situation and how our neighbors see it is very different.” Referring to the Doha Agreement, the participant continued,

³ Ray, S., 2021. *Taliban Now Controls Nine Provincial Capitals As U.S. Forces Continue To Withdraw From Afghanistan*. Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/siladityaray/2021/08/11/taliban-captures-three-more-provincial-capitals-amid-us-withdrawal-from-afghanistan/?sh=2ff81be9339d>.

⁴ *#SanctionPakistan Trends as Violence Rages in Afghanistan*, Social Media News | Al Jazeera, August 11, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/11/sanction-pakistan-twitter-trend-afghanistan-taliban>.

“Afghans are very critical... [the] Afghan people were not engaged and the Taliban were given a lot of legitimacy.”

Such tone by Afghan colleagues was understandable, as negative outcomes for them became more likely. An Afghan participant outlined three possible outcomes of the recent violence. One, would be a negotiated political settlement with the Taliban. Most participants believed that this outcome was now impossible given popular sentiments, Taliban advances, and American disengagement. The second possible outcome would be a stalemate following the U.S. withdrawal on August 31. The final possibility would be a complete Taliban takeover. Most participants at this point felt that a stalemate now represented the best of the bad outcomes. And, with the swift developments over the previous weekend, it was not difficult to understand why several participants feared collapse of the Afghan government and Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) was now possible, even imminent.

Participants from Pakistan defended that country's decisions and contended that Afghanistan and the international community may be asking too much of it. “Pakistan did not legitimize the Taliban,” countered one participant from Pakistan. “Americans are allowing Pakistan to take the blame for this.” From the Pakistani perspective, the meetings in Doha and the subsequent February 2020 agreement between the Taliban and the United States created a sense of legitimacy that accelerated the Taliban's insurgency. At the same time, the United States placed pressure on Pakistan to use its relationship with the Taliban to force negotiation with the Afghan government. “It is naïve for Americans and the international community to assume Pakistan can deliver peace.” Pakistan has its own challenge with the Taliban and other religious extremists in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. Furthermore, participants from all countries represented cited examples of other nations establishing formal and informal channels with the Taliban. “Managing” the Taliban through external coercion would remain difficult with so many regional and international players of differing interests involved.

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American perspectives also became more pessimistic, with multiple participants commenting on the unsustainability of both Afghanistan and the trilateral U.S.-Afghanistan-Pakistan relationship. One participant, resigned to reality, noted American influence on the Afghanistan-Pakistan relationship deteriorated to virtually nonexistent. Regarding the need for a side agreement between Afghanistan and Pakistan, “Both Afghanistan and Pakistan are open to U.S. facilitation. But now is not the time, because not much can be done.” A Pakistani colleague agreed: “The situation will remain tense, and the U.S. will not play a key leadership role.” Some expressed further worry about consistency in American foreign policy beyond counterterrorism initiatives. Said one American, “Other issues are bigger. Our interests are shifting. Our interests are about climate change, the pandemic, and other major power leaderships in the world.” This led to open-ended questions about the sustainability of American financial support following the withdrawal. According to one participant, the support for the ANSF was only authorized through 2023. Another participant noted the need for civil society support. “We need to recognize that

institutions in Afghanistan are heavily backed by U.S. support and the continuation of that support is necessary.”

As an American participant noted, “We’re heading into a dangerous area in our relations and it behooves us to think about how to maintain these relationships.” Participants did try to answer where to take these relationships next and how to best improve them. For some it would start with “the need to be more introspective in all three countries, although that is not the best thing to do politically or publicly.” Participants from the region concurred that all stakeholders need to take stock of their flaws, their failures, and their shared responsibility. A Pakistani participant noted that a good first step would be to adopt policies “of continuous engagement with each other bilaterally, trilaterally, and in other regional platforms.” There remain areas of mutual interest between the three parties, including counterterrorism, climate challenges, and refugee support.

Aftermath



Ongoing evacuation at Hamid Karzai International Airport on August 20. Photo Source: [Department of Defense](#).

Kabul fell to the Taliban four days later on August 15. The swift collapse of the Afghan government and the ANSF precipitated a mass evacuation and a severe internal and external refugee crisis that significantly impacted all three countries involved in the dialogue. Many of the fears expressed by participants during the entire dialogue came to pass, including many trapped Afghan nationals, a deteriorating human security and rights situation, oppression of women, terrorism from groups like Islamic State Khorasan (ISIS-K), possible economic collapse, and a refugee crisis with global implications.

The relationship between the United States, Afghanistan, and Pakistan remains at an uncertain crossroads, with the long-term picture to remain opaque. As of the writing of this report, the Taliban have established an interim government through the Islamic Emirate and is contending with small pockets of resistance in Panjshir province. Some in Pakistan’s government, including the Prime Minister, congratulated the Taliban on its victory signaling the possibility of recognition, while at the same time casting a wary eye toward Pakistan’s own Taliban group, the TTP, and the threat of extremism to its own government. The United States has emerged with diminished reputation given its handling of the evacuation, and found itself in the unenviable position of having to negotiate and cooperate with the Taliban during the final withdrawal. The relationships between the three countries at this time are transactional, driven by necessity with limited scope and temporary timeframes. With such a bleak outcome, only time will tell what the future of these relationships will be and whether those relationships will be tolerant or hostile.

Cover Photo: [Shutterstock](#).

The Hollings Center for International Dialogue is a non-profit, non-governmental organization dedicated to fostering dialogue between the United States and countries with predominantly Muslim populations in the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia, Eurasia, and Europe. In pursuit of its mission, the Hollings Center convenes dialogue conferences that generate new thinking on important international issues and deepen channels of communication across opinion leaders and experts. The Hollings Center is headquartered in Washington, D.C. and maintains a representative office in Istanbul, Turkey.

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