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The Lifeline of War: Pakistan's Logistical Role in Supporting US Military Operations in Afghanistan (2001–2021)

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ABSTRACT

This study examines and analyzes Pakistan's pivotal role in providing logistical support for US military operations in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021, a period marked by the dominance of extremist jihadist groups. It sheds light on the complex relationship between Washington and Islamabad, highlighting Pakistan's geographic location as a vital conduit for US and allied forces, its significant cross-border intelligence capabilities (both land and air), and its crucial military and morale contributions. The study explores the historical origins of this relationship, the profound impact of Pakistan's role in the struggle for survival of the strongest, stemming from its transnational religious and ethnic ties, and how Pakistan leveraged its logistical capabilities to influence US policy toward the Kabul government. The study concludes that the alliance was largely based on a mutually beneficial strategy. While trust between the two sides was not always absolute, shared interests played a decisive role in this long-standing relationship, despite fundamental differences. The study also examines the impact of the American withdrawal on the balance of power in Afghanistan, which shifted the balance in favor of emerging and increasingly influential powers..

KEYWORD: Logistical, War, relationship, United States, Pakistan

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1. INTRODUCTION

The geopolitical relationship between the United States and Pakistan represents a unique and significant model in the history of modern international relations, where national security requirements intersect with the logistical needs of countering transnational threats. Since the attacks of September 11, 2001, Pakistan has transformed from a pariah state under nuclear sanctions into a major non-NATO strategic ally. This transformation is driven less by ideology than by geography [1]. Pakistan is the only stable and economically viable land and air gateway for funding and supplying the international war machine in besieged Afghanistan. This has led Washington to overlook many significant political disagreements in order to supply its forces [2].

Pakistan's logistical role has been the true lifeline for both the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom and the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan. Maintaining hundreds of thousands of troops, heavy equipment, and fuel in one place for two decades would have been difficult without the ports of Karachi and the road network that runs through the Khyber Pass to the north and Spin Boldak to the south [3]. Experts argue that Pakistan's reliance on its Logistics Lines (GLOCs) gave Islamabad significant political leverage, which it skillfully used in negotiations with major powers [4]. However, this role was not merely a transit route; it was a major strategic gamble for Pakistan. Opening the country to American logistical supplies led to internal instability and waves of armed insurgency that viewed the Pakistani state as complicit in a "foreign invasion" [5].

Moreover, this logistical relationship was characterized by persistent mutual distrust. While Washington provided billions of dollars through the Coalition Support Fund for logistics and security services, it accused Pakistani intelligence agencies of engaging in strategic deception by harboring certain Taliban members [6]. From a Pakistani perspective, the objective was to protect its strategic depth from growing Indian influence in Afghanistan under American auspices, leading to a silent conflict beneath the guise of the declared alliance [7]. The clash of interests exacerbated the conflict and thwarted any strategic agreements that could have contributed to building a state in Afghanistan [8]. Figure 1 on the map illustrates the locations of Pakistani intelligence activities in Afghanistan.

This section concludes that the agreements were based on personal interests rather than shared ones. Consequently, the contradiction between American tactical objectives (defeating al-Qaeda) and Pakistani strategic objectives (regional balance of power) led to the end of the war with a sudden American withdrawal and the Taliban's resurgence in 2021. This raises fundamental questions about the region's future in light of the "deadly alliance" that bound Washington and Islamabad for many years [9, 10].



Figure 1. Location of Pakistani intelligence activity in Afghanistan

2. HISTORICAL US-PAKISTANI RELATIONS

The historical roots of the relationship between Washington and Islamabad date back to the early stages of the Cold War. This relationship wasn't based on shared values; it was more of a "alliance of necessity" because of the balance of power in South Asia. Pakistan joined the CENTO and SEATO alliances in the 1950s, which meant that it was on the side of the West. This was an important part of the American plan to stop the Soviet Union from growing [11]. This was the first step toward both sides relying on each other for logistics. For instance, the Bidaber Air Base in Pakistan was used as a base for American planes to spy on the Soviet Union from the air. This made Pakistan a "indispensable ally" for the Pentagon's military plans. [12]. This relationship reached a pivotal moment during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979–1989), when Pakistani territory transformed into a primary "launchpad" for the most extensive covert operation in CIA history. At that point, Pakistan's logistical role became clear in its best form through the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), which was in charge of giving American weapons and money to the "mujahideen." This made the idea of Pakistan's "strategic depth" in Afghanistan even stronger [13]. This relationship was always marked by "wavering pragmatism." As soon as the Soviets left, Washington turned its back on its ally and imposed harsh economic and nuclear sanctions on it under the "Pressler Amendment." This made the Pakistani military elite feel bitter because they thought America was a "unpredictable" ally [14]. This long-standing history of military cooperation and political betrayal shaped how Islamabad acted after September 2001. Pakistan joined the new alliance knowing that it needed American money as much as Washington needed its ports and roads. This made the following logistical relationship a

complicated "geopolitical bargain" in which both sides tried to get the most out of the deal with the least amount of long-term commitment [15].

3. PAKISTAN AND ITS STANCE ON THE US-AFGHAN WAR

The events of September 11, 2001, changed Pakistan's strategy because the US put a lot of pressure on Islamabad to stop supporting the Taliban government in Kabul. The Pakistani position was marked by forced pragmatism; following the notorious threat to revert Pakistan to the "Stone Age," President Pervez Musharraf acquiesced to Washington's seven demands, which entailed ceasing logistical support for the Taliban and granting access to its airspace and military bases for US forces [2]. Pakistan became a "rear base" for military operations, with air bases like Pakabad and Dalbandin set aside for US planes to take off and carry out supply and rescue missions [4]. The logistical role wasn't just about air support; it also included "Ground Communication Lines" (GLOCs), which moved thousands of tons of equipment and fuel every week from the port of Karachi through rough mountain passes [3]. Researchers contend that this logistical reliance rendered Pakistan an essential ally, notwithstanding profound American skepticism regarding perceived "double standards" in addressing the remnants of al-Qaeda [10]. Because of this stance, the Pakistani state had a lot of problems inside its own borders. Islamist groups and tribes along the border thought that giving logistical support for the "invasion" was a betrayal of national and religious values [9].

As the war went on, Washington used the Coalition Support Fund (CSF) to pay Pakistan for logistical support. This helped keep Pakistan's economy stable, which was having a hard time. This put Pakistan in a tough spot between needing money and being pressured by the people to get rid of the Americans [5]. Pakistan's contradictory stance arose from its apprehension of ceding influence in Afghanistan to India, prompting the adoption of a "dual containment" strategy [7]. While NATO forces were supported by logistical trucks that went through the Khyber Pass, the Pakistani government was trying to keep lines of communication open with Afghan groups to protect its own national security in the future [8].

This complicated policy caused a lot of problems. Whenever Washington put military pressure on Islamabad, Islamabad threatened to cut off logistical routes, showing that Pakistan had more control over the "lifeline of the war" than the Pentagon did [7]. By 2011, the tension had reached its highest point, showing how weak an alliance based only on logistical interests was without a common political vision [2].

4. THE PAKISTANI-AMERICAN RELATIONSHIP AFTER THE ARMED GROUPS' TAKEOVER OF AFGHANISTAN

The US and NATO forces left in August 2011, and Kabul fell to the Taliban very quickly. This was a major turning point for Pakistan's logistical role. Instead of using traditional overland supply lines, people had to use a "intelligence and political role" to deal with the new authority [16]. Washington felt a sense of "strategic betrayal" because it thought that Pakistan's quiet support for armed groups was a big reason why the previous Afghan government fell apart [7]. This made the relationship tense. Islamabad, for its part, tried to sell itself as an important "regional mediator" to stop a humanitarian disaster or security chaos that could spread across its borders. It used its historical influence over the Taliban leadership to get the world to accept the new reality [17].

But this stage showed the "paradox of Pakistani security." The Taliban's rise did not lead to stability along the border; instead, attacks by the Pakistani Taliban (TTP) from Afghan territory increased, putting Islamabad in a difficult security situation that made it ask Washington for technical and intelligence help again [17]. The relationship has changed from "field logistics partnership" to "over-the-horizon technical cooperation." This is because the US still needs Pakistani airspace to keep an eye on extremist groups like ISIS-Khorasan and al-Qaeda [19]. Even though political relations have cooled, the need for logistical and geographical dependence is still a geopolitical necessity that

keeps the two sides from completely breaking up in a region that is unstable and doesn't have any stable alternatives [20].

5. VARIABLES IN THE RELATIONSHIP AND THE EXTENT OF REGIONAL INFLUENCE

The logistical and security relationship between Washington and Islamabad was not independent from regional dynamics; instead, it was "hostage" to the geopolitical equilibrium in South Asia. India was a key factor in Pakistan's plans because Islamabad saw the US-Indian rapprochement as a threat to its existence. To make sure its role was not downplayed in favor of New Delhi in Kabul's security arrangements, Islamabad used the "Afghan logistics" card [21]. On the other hand, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) made China a strategic and economic alternative. This gave Pakistan more options and lessened its reliance on US military aid, changing its role from "logistical partner for war" to "logistical hub for transcontinental trade" [22].

Iran and Russia's positions in the region, on the other hand, had an effect on how the relationship worked; While Tehran kept a close eye on the US troops on its eastern border, Moscow started to change its relationship with the Taliban and Pakistan to fill the strategic gap that would be left after the US left [23]. This many regional poles weakened Pakistan's "logistical monopoly." Washington wanted to find other ways to get through Central Asian countries (the Northern Distribution Network), but it always ran into high costs and political problems with Russia. This showed that Pakistan's geography was still the "least bad option" [24]. The overlap of these regional interests turned Afghanistan into the setting for the "new Great Game," where each country tried to protect its own interests through local proxies. This made it harder for Washington to achieve long-term stability [25]. Pakistan's move toward "geo-economics" and its efforts to balance its ties with Washington and Beijing are the biggest threats to Pakistan's future role in the region [26].

6. HISTORICAL TIES AND ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE TWO PEOPLES

It is impossible to understand the complexities of Pakistan's logistical role without examining the structure of the ethnic and religious overlap that links the two sides of the Durand Line. The British drew this border, but it never worked to keep the Pashtun tribes apart. They make up the largest group of people in eastern Afghanistan and northwestern Pakistan [27]. This "ethnic connection" made the border fluid, so the tribes don't see it as a political barrier but as natural ways to interact socially and do business. This made American logistical supply operations go through a complicated web of loyalties [28]. There are twice as many Pashtuns in Pakistan as there are in Afghanistan. This "social depth" makes the Pakistani government take ethnic sensitivities into account when making military decisions [29] [Figure 2](#).

Along with ethnicity, the "religious bond," which includes the Hanafi school of thought and the Deobandi schools, is the most important part of the shared identity. Many of the leaders of the Taliban and other armed groups went to religious seminaries in Haqqania and other Pakistani cities. This has led to a "transnational brotherhood" that goes beyond the idea of the nation-state [30]. The Pakistani military has had a hard time cutting off all logistical or intelligence supply lines because they are worried that it will cause a religious uprising within their ranks or among the people [7]. Since the 1980s, Pakistan has taken in millions of Afghan refugees. This has led to the "Afghanization" of many parts of Pakistani society and the growth of border economies that depend on smuggling and trucking. The same routes were later used by US logistics [31].

This anthropological extension meant that people in the tribal areas saw any American military action coming from Pakistan as an attack on "ethnic and religious identity." This is why local groups kept attacking logistical convoys, which they saw as a break from Pashtunwali traditions (the tribal

constitution) [32]. Also, intermarriage, family ties, and shared trade made a fabric that political agreements couldn't tear apart. This made Pakistan's role inherently "schizophrenic": it was a technical ally of Washington, but also a natural and historical partner of the Afghan people [33]. In the end, the American strategy in Afghanistan didn't work because it didn't take these deep ties into account. This made Pakistan's "war artery" pump social and political blood with different goals [34]. The ongoing nature of this ethnic and religious continuity is the only thing that will keep Islamabad's power in Kabul, no matter who is in charge there [35].

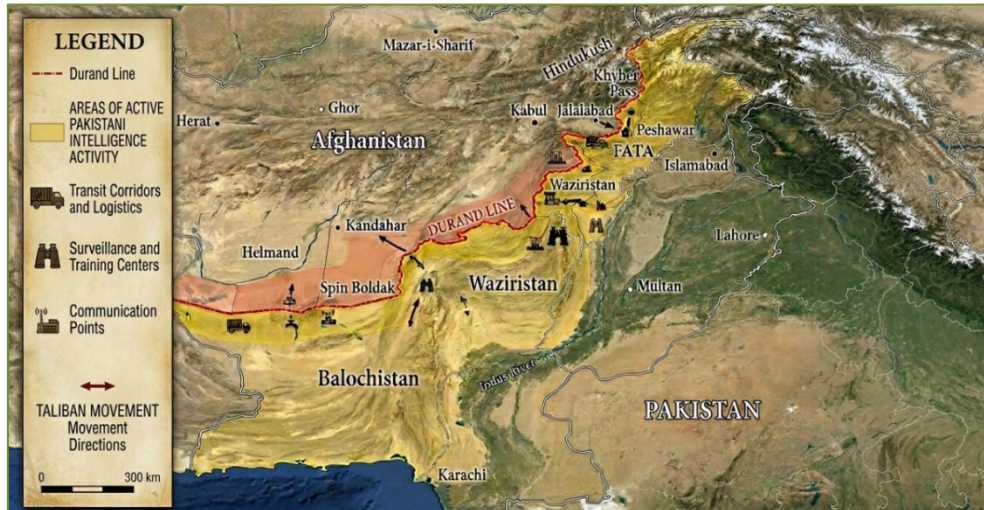


Figure 2. Tribal overlap along the Pakistani-Afghan border

7. PAKISTANI POLITICAL INFLUENCE ON US DECISION-MAKING REGARDING POWER IN AFGHANISTAN

Pakistan's role was more than just providing logistical corridors; it was also a "strategic guide" that had a big impact on US decisions about the political power structure in Kabul. Islamabad was able to persuade Washington for a long time that the "Pashtun component," which it controlled, was key to stability in Afghanistan. It warned against pushing it to the side in favor of the Northern Alliance [36]. The Pakistani government used political pressure to stop any Indian-Afghan rapprochement, saying that any political authority in Kabul must be "friendly" or at least "neutral" to Pakistani interests. As a result, US administrations have worked with Pakistani intelligence (ISI) on efforts to bring the Taliban and the country back together [37].

Pakistan also acted as the "only way to communicate" during the Doha talks, which affected the US's choice to treat the Taliban as a legitimate political party. This changed the goal of the war from "military eradication" to "political settlement" [38]. The White House decision-maker was hesitant to impose harsh sanctions on Islamabad because they were afraid that it would cause the Afghan political process to fall apart. This shows that Pakistan had the most power over the American withdrawal strategy [39]. Islamabad was able to protect its political interests by making sure that loyal representatives were in place in any political structure after the withdrawal. This was possible because Washington needed a regional mediator who had "the strings of the game" on the ground [40].

8. CONCLUSIONS

The Inevitability of Geography versus Political Sovereignty: Experience has shown that the geography of Pakistan was an unbreakable "solid constraint." The US military would have had to deal with logistical paralysis or very high costs if it didn't have access to Pakistani land and air supply lines. This dependence gave Islamabad diplomatic immunity, which allowed it to protect its national interests even when there was a lot of pressure from other countries [7].

The "Uneasy Alliance" Model and Mutual Dependence: The two-decade period came to a close without a cohesive strategic vision. Both sides kept working together in a "tactical transactional relationship." Pakistan sold facilities to Washington to keep the balance of power in the region, which made the alliance weak and based on mutual suspicion instead of trust [9].

The Victory of Natural Connections over Military Tactics: The war showed that ethnic (Pashtun) and religious ties across borders were stronger than Pentagon plans. The sociological integration of the two populations rendered Pakistan incapable of being a "full" partner in the eradication of the Taliban, as such involvement would have resulted in internal political and social demise [30].

Washington thought that "playing both sides" was a bad idea, but Islamabad saw it as a smart way to stay alive and avoid being surrounded by India through Afghanistan. Pakistan was able to persuade US policymakers to make sure that its allies in Kabul had a political role at the end of the conflict [39].

The US's withdrawal and the change in its logistical role: With the withdrawal in 2021, Pakistan's "on-the-ground" logistical role came to an end, and a new era of "over-the-horizon cooperation" began. However, the results showed that Pakistan's security problems got worse when the US wasn't there directly (for example, the rise in TTP attacks). This showed that Pakistan still needed new technical security cooperation [19].

The Decline of Western Power and the Rise of Regional Powers: The ongoing tension in the logistical relationship sped up Pakistan's move toward China and Russia as strategic options. This changed the balance of power in South Asia and turned Afghanistan into a new arena for international competition, where the United States is no longer the only power [22]

The Lesson of History in the "Graveyard of Empires": The study verifies that a superpower, irrespective of its logistical prowess, cannot enforce political stability in a context that socially and ethnically opposes it. Furthermore, Pakistan's involvement served as a "lifeline" that extended the military presence yet failed (and refrained) from achieving a decisive victory for the Western perspective [10].

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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