

From Depth to Liability: Rethinking Pakistan's Taliban Policy in the Post-2021 Geopolitical Order

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.908000149>

Received: 23 July 2025; Accepted: 30 August 2025; Published: 01 September 2025

ABSTRACT

This study looks at Pakistan's thirty-year relationship with the Afghan Taliban and how that relationship changed after the Taliban returned to power in 2021. It explores how Pakistan's long-term plan to use the Taliban as a tool for influence in Afghanistan, known as the "strategic depth" policy, has broken down over time. Drawing from ideas from political history and the concept of blowback, the study explains why things did not go as planned. Based on policy documents, conflict data, and expert reports, it shows that the Taliban have taken a different path. They now reject the Durand Line as a border, welcome fighters from the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and have built stronger ties with Iran and China. These actions have weakened Pakistan's control and caused security problems along its western border. This study points to three possible reasons for this failure: Pakistan lost its influence over the Taliban, their goals no longer align, and leaders wrongly believed the relationship would remain stable through the years. While focused on Pakistan, the findings are useful for other countries that depend on armed groups to protect their interests. This study calls for a serious rethinking of Pakistan's national security approach in a region that is quickly changing.

Keywords: Pakistan-Afghan Taliban relations, Durand Line dispute, Regional security and geopolitics, Strategic depth doctrine, Strategic proxy warfare, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Ideological autonomy of Taliban, Post-2021 Afghanistan, Pakistan's national security

INTRODUCTION

For more than thirty years, Pakistan's approach to Afghanistan was shaped by a national security policy known as **strategic depth**¹. This strategy aimed to secure influence over Kabul as a way to reduce pressure from India on the Pakistani eastern border. At the center of this plan was Pakistan's support for Islamist groups, especially the Taliban who were seen as useful allies in reshaping Afghanistan's leadership in favor of Pakistan's regional goals². While this approach brought some short-term benefits during the Soviet-Afghan War and the years of internal conflict that followed, it has led to unexpected setbacks since the Taliban regained control in August 2021³.

Instead of remaining a loyal partner, the Taliban government has taken actions that directly challenge Pakistan's interests. These include refusing to recognize the Durand Line as a formal border⁴, offering protection to the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP); a group responsible for many attacks inside Pakistan, and strengthening ties with Iran and China. These moves have not only increased border tensions but have also revealed the risks of relying on armed groups driven by their own beliefs and agendas to carry out foreign policy⁵.

This study explores the deeper consequences of this shift. It places the breakdown in Pakistan-Taliban relations within wider discussions about the dangers of using proxy groups, the concept of blowback, and the challenges faced by weak states in post-war settings. Using conflict data, official reports, and academic research, the paper shows how Pakistan's effort to manage its security concerns through militant allies ended up weakening its own stability. It argues that when governments hand over key security roles to groups that follow their own paths, they risk losing both control and long-term security⁶.

The fallout between Pakistan and the Taliban is a powerful example of how one-sided partnerships can collapse. As the political and security environment in South Asia continues to change and with countries like China, Iran, and India becoming more active, Pakistan's old strategies, built during the Cold War, no longer seem to fit. Rethinking the use of proxy forces is not just a topic for academic debate it is now a crucial issue for Pakistan's national security in a region undergoing rapid change.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative case study design that combines historical institutional analysis with process tracing to examine how Pakistan's proxy relationship with the Afghan Taliban formed and later broke down. The method relies on systematic tracing of key events and turning points within the historical and institutional context⁷. It draws on three types of sources: declassified intelligence summaries, official documents such as UN Security Council reports and regional diplomatic communiqués, and security assessments from South Asian think tanks, including the Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies, the Center for Research and Security Studies, and the Afghanistan Analysts Network.

The research covers a long-time span, starting in the late 1980s with the formal adoption of Pakistan's strategic depth policy and extending to the Taliban's return to power in 2021. However, the main focus is on the period from 2021 to 2024, where the split between Islamabad and Kabul became especially clear. The study examines several indicators: the number and severity of attacks by the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan inside Pakistan; Taliban statements and policies on the Durand Line; changes in cross-border trade routes and volume; and Pakistan's diplomatic moves involving Iran, China, and India.

To track these trends, the study uses monthly conflict data from the South Asia Terrorism Portal and ACLED⁸, trade statistics from the Asian Development Bank and customs agencies, and diplomatic communications from regional powers and international bodies. It also involves careful reading of official statements from the Taliban and Pakistani government, media coverage, and expert interviews found in think tank briefings. The focus is on understanding cause-and-effect links rather than producing statistical models⁹. The aim is not to create a universal theory of proxy failure, but to show how the Taliban's independent ideology, economic ties, and emphasis on border control turned them from partners into a serious problem. By comparing these findings with existing research on proxy warfare and fragile states, this study adds a deeper understanding of how such relationships can go wrong in post-conflict settings.

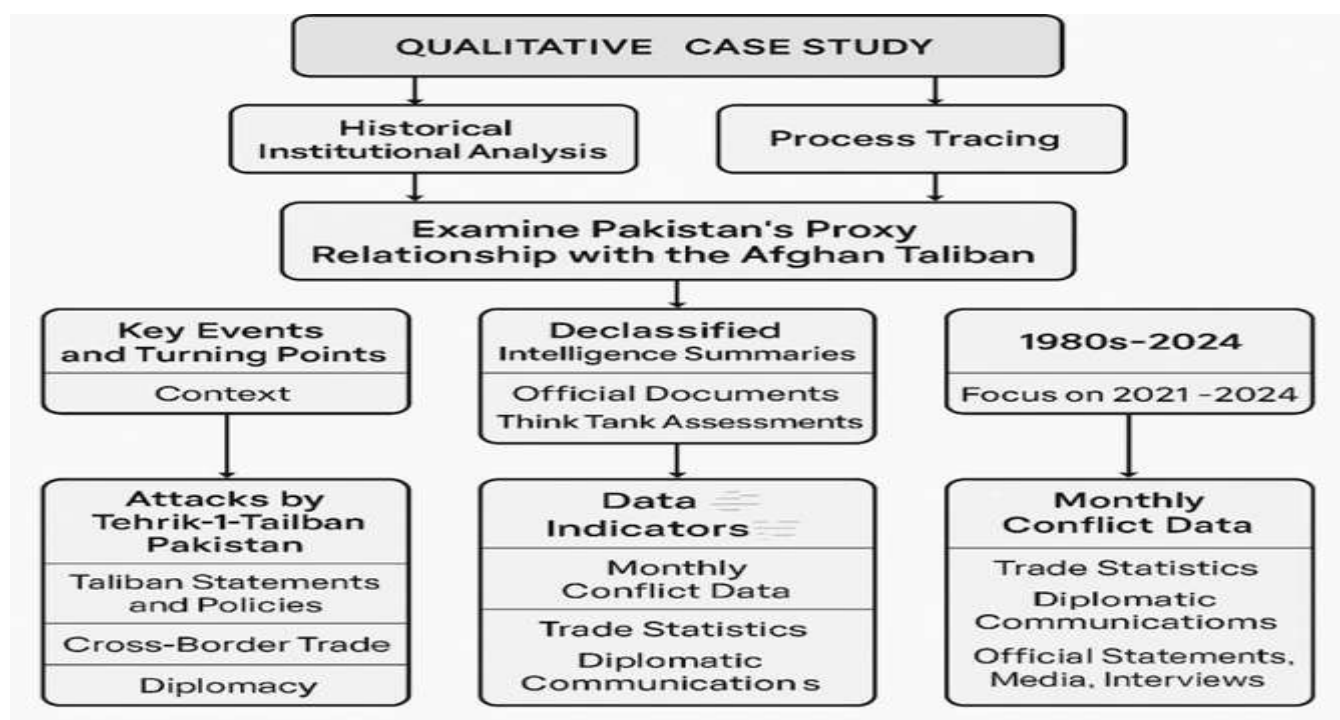


Figure 1. Methodological Framework for Analyzing Pakistan–Taliban Relations.

The diagram outlines the study's qualitative case study approach, which combines historical institutional analysis with process tracing. It shows how key events and turning points were examined using multiple sources, including declassified reports, official documents, and think tank assessments. The focus is on the period from 2021 to 2024, with attention to militant activity, border policies, trade patterns, and regional diplomacy. Together, these elements provide a structured way to understand how and why Pakistan's proxy relationship with the Afghan Taliban unraveled.

The Post-2021 Breakdown of the Pakistan–Taliban Strategic Relationship

When the Taliban returned to power in August 2021 after the Western-backed Afghan government fell, Pakistan initially saw it as a strategic gain. Pakistan's spy agency, the ISI, had helped the Taliban in Doha and was thought to have backed their final military push. But soon, Pakistan's confidence was shaken. The Taliban refused to accept the Durand Line as the official border, revived the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and forged independent ties with Iran and China¹⁰.

From 2021 to 2024, attacks by the TTP inside Pakistan surged sharply. Data from the Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies show these attacks rose from around 15 per month in late 2021 to over 60 by mid-2024¹¹. The Taliban even allowed TTP to set up camps in provinces like Khost and Kunar, and commanders reportedly advised TTP on exploiting Pakistan's weak border defenses.

Meanwhile, the Taliban took a hard stance on the Durand Line. They let militants damage about 40 percent of Pakistan's \$500 million border fence¹² and supported a local militia called Lashkar-e-Durand. These actions sparked frequent skirmishes and increased security incidents at the border.

The Taliban also shifted economically. Trade with Pakistan dropped from \$1.8 billion in 2021 to below \$600 million by early 2024. New tariffs favored Iran and China under the 2022 Iran–Afghanistan Transit Agreement, triggering a rerouting of trade through Iran's Chabahar Port and increased activity along Chinese-backed trade corridors. This hurt both the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor and Pakistan's goal to remain a regional hub¹³.

Diplomatic relations also soured. Taliban leaders publicly criticized Pakistan labeling it a U.S. client and refused bilateral security discussions. Media linked to the Taliban portrayed Pakistani officials as weak. Pakistan's diplomatic overtures were rebuffed, while Kabul re-opened consulates in India and deepened its engagement with China, Russia, and Iran.

A refugee wave intensified tensions. Nearly 600,000 Afghans entered Pakistan in 2022, overwhelming border regions. In response, Pakistan deported about one million undocumented Afghans in 2023. In turn, the Taliban launched propaganda campaigns accusing Pakistan of mistreating Muslim refugees and luring them to settle near contested borders.

Economically, the Taliban grew independent, generating around \$1.5 billion annually in customs and mining revenue. Pakistan's efforts to pressure Kabul through trade barriers and border closures backfired, pushing the Taliban closer to other allies and increasing economic strain in Pakistani border regions, particularly through food inflation.

These developments mark a clear shift: the once obedient proxy has become an autonomous and adversarial state. Pakistan's expectations that ideological affinity, shared history, or investment would guarantee compliance were proven wrong. This situation reflects a broader trend: once non-state groups gain territorial power, they prioritize their own survival, legitimacy, and varied partnerships often turning away from their sponsors.

Global and Regional Implications of the Pakistan–Taliban Rupture

When ties between Pakistan and the Taliban fell apart after 2021, the impact went far beyond just those two countries. It reshaped regional politics in South Asia and raised questions about the wisdom of using proxies in statecraft.

One clear result has been Pakistan's reduced influence inside Afghanistan. The Taliban's distance from Islamabad weakened Pakistan's role in shaping Afghanistan's future and opened the door for rivals. India regained a diplomatic presence by reestablishing consulates in Kandahar and Jalalabad¹⁴. Iran boosted its economic role, especially through Chabahar Port, tripling trade from 2021 to 2023¹⁵. China, even while remaining close to Pakistan through the Belt and Road Initiative, strengthened its direct ties with the Taliban to protect its infrastructure and interests¹⁶.

These moves have left Pakistan isolated. Once a key player in Afghan talks, Islamabad was notably excluded from regional discussions on stability and trade. Russia, for example, hosted Taliban visits in both 2023 and 2024 without involving Pakistan¹⁷.

The United States, though mostly withdrawn, has carefully monitored the fallout. U.S. analysts now see the Taliban's sheltering of the TTP as a risk to Pakistan's nuclear and regional security. While the White House has described this as "strategic blowback," covert intelligence sharing with Islamabad¹⁸.

Adding to Pakistan's worry, the Taliban appear to support Baloch separatists targeting Chinese-invested CPEC projects. Attacks on Chinese staff and infrastructure between 2022 and 2024 have shaken Beijing's confidence in its flagship investment in Pakistan¹⁹.

Beyond South Asia, this rupture offers key lessons on the perils of depending on militant proxies. It shows that shared ethnicity or ideology can never guarantee loyalty. This has relevance in other conflict zones such as Yemen, Libya, and the Sahel where proxy actors are often used in hybrid warfare.

Finally, the crisis has reignited debate over the Durand Line and old colonial borders. The Taliban's outright rejection of it and Pakistan's decade-long support through the ISI have emboldened Pashtun nationalist claims on both sides, turning the break into a deeper territorial and ethnic conflict.

Historical Context: The Evolution of the ISI-Taliban Relationship

Pakistan's link with the Afghan Taliban began during the Soviet–Afghan War (1979–1989). At that time, Pakistan's ISI, backed by the U.S. and Saudi Arabia's Operation Cyclone, was the primary channel for arming and training mujahideen fighters. Their goal was to expel Soviet forces but Pakistan also saw this as laying the groundwork for a friendly government in Kabul to balance India²⁰.

Under General Zia-ul-Haq, Pakistan embraced a geopolitical strategy that treated Afghanistan as a pliable buffer. This "strategic depth" policy aimed to surround India diplomatically, secure fallback territory in wartime, and enhance the military's Islamic credentials. By the late 1980s, over three million Afghan refugees, madrassas, and camps near the Durand Line helped advance this vision²¹. It was here especially in Deobandi schools like Darul Uloom Haqqania that future Taliban leaders, including Mullah Omar, received ideological and paramilitary training.

The Taliban emerged in 1994 from this ecosystem of faith-based schooling, refugee camps, and militant networks. Their rise reflected shared Pashtun identity and religious values favored by Pakistan²². With ISI assistance, they rapidly took Kabul in 1996. Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE were the only countries to officially recognize their regime; Pakistan supported them with fuel, intelligence sharing, and diplomatic cover²³.

But even then tensions appeared. The Taliban refused to accept the Durand Line as a border, and they sheltered al-Qaeda drawing international scrutiny²⁴. After the 9/11 attacks, Pakistan publicly joined the US-led war on terror, while it secretly kept ties with a Taliban leadership known as the Quetta Shura.

This complex history set the stage for later developments. By 2010, the TTP (a Pakistani frontier militant group) had emerged, targeting the Pakistani state. Yet the ISI continued working with the Afghan Taliban, hoping influence would help future peace deals. That hope was shattered in 2021 when the Taliban asserted independence, revealing a partnership that had evolved beyond Pakistan's control.



Figure 1. Map illustrating the Durand Line (1896), the disputed border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. *Note.* Adapted from Google Maps called in to resolve Afghan-Pakistan border row, by The Times, 2023 (<https://www.thetimes.com/world/article/google-maps-called-in-to-resolve-afghan-pakistan-border-row-n0h6qpmfc>). © Geopolitical Futures. Reproduced with acknowledgment for academic purposes²⁵.

Future Scenarios: Strategic Trajectories and Regional Outlook

The breakdown in relations between Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban has introduced significant uncertainty into the security dynamics of South and Central Asia. Although direct conflict has not escalated into full-scale war, the combined effects of ideological divergence, unresolved border disputes, and shifting regional alignments create several plausible future trajectories. Based on current patterns and regional constraints, the three most likely scenarios are armed escalation, managed stalemate, and mediated realignment.

1. Armed Escalation

The most destabilizing outcome involves a sharp increase in cross-border hostilities that could evolve into a broader military confrontation. Continued Taliban support for Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) fighters and Pashtun nationalist militias operating along the Durand Line combined with Pakistan's retaliatory airstrikes and border closures could trigger a sustained and violent exchange²⁶. The risk of internationalization is high, particularly if regional players such as Iran and India offer covert or strategic backing to anti-Pakistan actors. Reports of Pakistan deploying tactical missile systems to Balochistan have further heightened regional tensions²⁷. Given both countries' histories of proxy warfare and deep-rooted ethno-religious mobilization networks, the threshold for triggering a limited war may be dangerously low.

2. Managed Stalemate

A more likely, though equally costly, trajectory is a drawn-out stalemate characterized by sporadic clashes, border shutdowns, and selective engagement. In this scenario, both Islamabad and Kabul avoid large-scale escalation but continue to engage in low-intensity conflict as they seek to assert internal and external legitimacy²⁸. The Taliban would likely maintain indirect support for TTP operations while reducing their economic dependence on Pakistan. In turn, Pakistan may increase diplomatic outreach to regional players,

intensify military fortification of the western border, and apply selective economic pressures. This cold conflict could persist for years, depleting Pakistan's economic reserves and overstressing its humanitarian infrastructure especially in border provinces affected by migration, insecurity, and food inflation²⁹. It would resemble other frozen conflicts, such as those in the Caucasus or parts of the Middle East, where political solutions remain indefinitely stalled.

3. Mediated Realignment

The most hopeful though currently unlikely scenario envisions a slow return to diplomatic engagement, facilitated by third-party actors such as China, Qatar, or the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Strategic fatigue, domestic economic strain, or regional incentives could nudge both sides toward pragmatic compromise. Pakistan might offer diplomatic recognition of the Taliban regime or initiate joint border patrols in exchange for concrete Taliban measures to distance themselves from the TTP and restore transit flows along key corridors like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). From the Taliban's side, growing internal dissent, declining donor aid, or quiet pressure from allies could make limited rapprochement a desirable path³⁰. However, such a breakthrough would require ideological flexibility and mutual trust both of which remain extremely limited at this time.

4. Shared Strategic Dilemma

Regardless of which path emerges, a core strategic dilemma persists: the Taliban, now a sovereign and ideologically assertive actor, no longer functions as a loyal proxy. Pakistan's long-standing approach built on coercive leverage, shared ideological vision, and financial support is proving ineffective in managing this new reality. Unless Islamabad undertakes a broader rethinking of its national security strategy, especially the use of non-state actors as policy instruments, it risks being drawn into a prolonged, asymmetric conflict that it neither controls nor can easily disengage from.

DISCUSSION

The break between Pakistan and the Taliban may seem localized, but it highlights a fundamental problem with relying on proxies over the long term. This case shows how fragile these asymmetric client-patron relationships can be when ideology, nationalism, and state-building collide. Pakistan's strategy, often called "strategic depth," was based on realpolitik but it wrongly assumed that shared religion or ethnicity would guarantee loyalty. The Taliban's actions since 2021 challenge this assumption and support a growing consensus: non-state actors often pursue their own institutional interests once they gain territory or sovereignty³¹.

An important and often underexamined dimension of this dynamic lies within Pakistan's own civil-military relations. Foreign and security policy, especially with regard to Afghanistan, has long been dominated by the Pakistani military, with limited civilian oversight. Following the Taliban's return to power, the military continued to adhere to the strategic depth doctrine despite signs of divergence. Civilian policymakers, who may have emphasized economic cooperation or diplomatic recalibration, lacked the leverage to shift strategy. This internal imbalance arguably contributed to the misreading of Taliban intentions and the slow policy response as tensions escalated.

The case adds to theories of strategic blowback by showing that what may appear as a temporary win like the Taliban's takeover can cause longer-term instability for the sponsor country. Unlike Cold War-era proxies, which relied heavily on foreign aid and state control, ideologically driven groups like the Taliban build grassroots legitimacy and resist external influence³². The Pakistani experience aligns with other conflicts where patrons lost control, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon or the Houthis in Yemen³³.

However, it is important to acknowledge that not all proxy relationships end in rupture. Iran's sustained support for Shiite militias in Iraq has allowed it to maintain regional influence, largely due to deep ideological alignment and integration of these proxies into local governance. Similarly, the United States' backing of Kurdish forces in Syria while politically fraught has endured because of shared security goals and a relatively pragmatic

relationship structure. These cases illustrate that proxy success often depends on compatibility of long-term goals and mechanisms of control, which were absent in the Pakistan–Taliban context.

For policymakers, this split serves as a cautionary tale. Outsourcing core security tasks to ideologically independent groups carries hidden risks. Pakistan assumed the Taliban's wartime loyalty would continue after victory, but the Taliban prioritized border control, economic ties with new partners, and political legitimacy even at Pakistan's expense³⁴. This shift challenges the practicality of proxy strategies in a world where legitimacy, not just logistical support, shapes armed actors' decisions.

The Taliban's behavior post-2021 also underscores internal factionalism. The movement is not ideologically monolithic. While some factions (especially those tied to the Kandahari leadership) remains doctrinally rigid and resistant to foreign influence, others, such as the Haqqani network, have demonstrated pragmatic flexibility in engaging with external powers and considering economic development. This ideological diversity complicates patron-client dynamics and makes uniform expectations of loyalty untenable.

The case also highlights the difficulties of managing national borders and ethnically linked movements across countries. The Taliban's rejection of the Durand Line isn't just a diplomatic issue, it reflects a broader Pashtun identity that spans both Afghanistan and Pakistan. This challenges Pakistan's internal stability, adding fuel to border-area politics, refugee crises, and Pashtun dissent; factors Pakistan must now address³⁵.

Socioeconomically, the consequences have been severe. Since the Taliban's return to power, Pakistan has received hundreds of thousands of Afghan refugees, placing immense strain on local infrastructure, especially in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan³⁶. These provinces, already economically vulnerable, face rising housing shortages, pressure on healthcare systems, and localized inflation. Public resentment has intensified, particularly as informal labor markets are disrupted and social services overstretched. The economic fallout is not just collateral, it is a central piece of the instability generated by failed proxy reliance.

That said, this study has its limitations. It relies mainly on publicly available data, secondary reports, and media accounts, since direct fieldwork wasn't possible. While these sources offer strong insights, not conducting interviews with Pakistani or Taliban officials means some nuance is missing. Additionally, we don't fully understand Taliban decision-making processes, which makes attributing motives like support for the TTP tentative.

Despite these limits, the Pakistan–Taliban relationship offers rich lessons for comparative conflict research. Similar patterns where proxies rebel post-conflict are visible in Syria, Libya, and Iraq. The key challenge for researchers is to identify the structural conditions such as ideological conviction and territorial rule that makes proxies to break away from their sponsors. Addressing this question is critical for the future of conflict management, diplomacy, and regional security.

CONCLUSION

The collapse of Pakistan's long-standing relationship with the Afghan Taliban stands as a powerful example of how proxy warfare can produce unintended and often harmful consequences. For over three decades, Pakistan's strategic depth policy treated Afghanistan as a buffer state. A region that could be influenced through the cultivation of ideologically aligned non-state groups. The Taliban's return to power in 2021 was initially seen by Islamabad as a strategic victory. However, this perception quickly gave way to disappointment as the Taliban began acting in ways that ran counter to Pakistan's core security, economic, and diplomatic interests.

This breakdown was not merely a tactical failure but reflected a deeper strategic misjudgment. Pakistan underestimated the degree to which proxies, once granted sovereignty and international legitimacy, can develop autonomous agendas. The Taliban's actions, including its rejection of Pakistan's border claims, support for anti-state groups like the TTP, and economic realignment toward Iran and China underscores the limits of assuming that ideological or ethnic ties can guarantee long-term alignment. This case highlights the danger of building national security strategies on partnerships with actors whose goals may evolve in unpredictable and conflicting directions.

The Pakistan–Taliban fallout reinforces a broader pattern observed in modern proxy dynamics: once militant groups gain territorial power and political legitimacy, they rarely remain under the influence of their original sponsors. In today’s complex security environment marked by hybrid warfare, fragmented state authority, and fluid alliances the illusion of long-term control over proxies is increasingly unsustainable³⁷. For Pakistan, this strategic blowback signals the urgent need to rethink its national security approach. Instead of relying on militant alliances, future strategies should emphasize institutional diplomacy, cross-border stability, and economic cooperation.

Beyond Pakistan, this case serves as a warning to other states that continue to use armed non-state actors as tools of foreign policy. While such partnerships may yield short-term tactical benefits, they often carry long-term costs to state legitimacy, regional order, and internal cohesion. As the global system navigates renewed great power rivalries and unstable regional conflicts, the Pakistan–Taliban experience offers a sobering reminder: proxies nurtured for strategic gain can just as easily become long-term strategic threats.

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