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# U.S.–AFGHANISTAN RELATIONS IN THE POST-2021 ERA: STRATEGIC SHIFTS, SECURITY CHALLENGES, AND REGIONAL DYNAMICS

**Asad Ali***

*Lecturer in Political Science, Government Postgraduate Jehanzeb College Saidu Sharif, Swat*

asadkhan007744@gmail.com

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**Corresponding Author: ***
**Asad Ali**

**Abstract**
*The withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan in August 2021 marked a major turning point in U.S.–Afghanistan relations and reshaped the political and security environment of the region. This study examines the changing nature of U.S.–Afghanistan relations in the post-2021 era, with particular attention to strategic shifts, security challenges, and their wider regional implications. It explores how the Taliban's return to power, the absence of formal diplomatic recognition, continued U.S. counterterrorism concerns, humanitarian pressures, and the growing influence of regional actors have affected the relationship. Using a qualitative approach based on secondary sources, including policy reports, academic studies, official documents, and credible international sources, the study analyzes major developments since 2021. The study argues that U.S.–Afghanistan relations have shifted from direct military engagement toward a limited and interest-based approach centered on counterterrorism, humanitarian concerns, diplomatic engagement, and regional stability. It concludes that this evolving relationship will remain important for Afghanistan's internal stability and the wider security dynamics of South and Central Asia.*

## Introduction

The withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan in August 2021 ended two decades of direct American military involvement and began a new and uncertain phase in U.S.–Afghanistan relations. The Taliban's return to power ended the Western-backed Islamic Republic and established a government that has not received formal diplomatic recognition from any state, including the United States (Shahnan & Hussain, 2024). However, non-recognition has not prevented limited interaction between Washington and Kabul. Since 2021, U.S. engagement has mainly focused on counterterrorism, the protection and release of American citizens and detainees, and strategic concerns such as access to Bagram Airfield (Foreign Policy, 2025; Geopolitical Monitor, 2025). Meanwhile, the U.S. withdrawal has reshaped the regional security environment. The reduced American presence has created greater space for China, Russia, Iran, Pakistan, and Central Asian states to expand their diplomatic, economic, and security engagement with Afghanistan (Thomas, 2026). Consequently, post-2021 Afghanistan has emerged as an arena of regional competition and cooperation, while U.S.

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policy has shifted from direct military involvement toward limited and selective engagement.

The central research question of this paper is: After 2021, have U.S. strategic interests, security concerns and diplomatic posture towards Afghanistan also changed, and what influence have these changes had on its role in the international system due to regional actors' policies? It argues that the character of U.S.-Afghan relations has evolved from an active military and developmental involvement to a transactional security-driven, non-recognitionist dynamic, one that is now more defined by China, Pakistan, Iran and Russia. It is a reflection of the new material context on the ground, as in the absence of an American presence in Afghanistan, and a broader reorientation of the U.S. foreign policy focus toward great-power competition as Afghanistan has emerged as less the single issue than it was before—and more one among many in a broader contest with China (Thomas, 2026; Responsible Statecraft, 2025).

The paper draws upon relevant information from the U.S. government, Congressional reports, monitoring reports from the United Nations Security Council, and that from peer-reviewed and think-tank analysis. It is segmented in five sections. The first section examines the changing nature of the U.S. strategic interests in Afghanistan since the end of the conflict. The second one is related to nature and the way of governance of Taliban regime. The third tackles security and counterterrorism issues including the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISIS-K), al Qaeda and the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The fourth is related to humanitarian condition and Diplomatic engagement. The fifth looks at regional dynamics with Pakistan, China, Iran and Central Asia. The paper ends with an analytical discussion and conclusion on this subject, which situates the results in a broader context of the research on international relations after military disengagement.

**U.S. Strategic Interests After the Withdrawal**

After the withdrawal, America's strategic interest in Afghanistan reduced significantly in terms of scope but not complete. Congress engaged in and devoted attention to the process of withdrawal in the years that followed 2021, holding numerous hearings on the subject, and establishing the Afghanistan War Commission in the FY 2022 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) tasked with examining lessons learned from the 20-year war in Afghanistan (Thomas, 2023). Afghanistan gradually became a less prominent foreign policy concern, though, over time. Significantly, neither of the two national security and defense strategies—2025 National Security Strategy nor 2026 National Defense Strategy—contained the word "Afghanistan," and one U.S. official told us that in mid-2025 Washington's policy in Afghanistan had "narrowed" to protect U.S. interests. This is an improvement over the ranking of Afghanistan on congressional oversight agendas, as recently as the 118th Congress, Afghanistan withdrawal and policy issues were among the top ten items on the House Foreign Affairs Committee's oversight agenda, behind only China and the Pacific region (Thomas, 2026).

This emphasis has also been met with a lack of finances. The United States provided more than $3.8 billion in humanitarian and development assistance to Afghanistan from the time of the withdrawal through mid-2025, but the second Trump administration later ended all foreign assistance awards in the country, said the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, an oversight office that shut down in January 2026 (Thomas, 2026). Nearly $3.5 billion worth of Afghan central bank reserves are held in the Afghan Fund, a Switzerland-based entity founded in September 2022, which has so far in early 2025, not disbursed any money for Afghanistan's economy, showing continued U.S. hesitation to release funds that could be used directly by the Taliban (Thomas, 2025).

In what was a surprising addition to the formal lack of involvement, in 2025 the U.S. government was once again demanding the return of Bagram

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Airfield, the massive air base north of Kabul that was home to the operational center of the American war effort for two decades. President Trump publicly brought the matter up several times during 2025, such as in a 2025 post on his social media account warning that "bad things" would happen if the Taliban didn't return the base, and he confirmed that U.S. officials, including former special envoy Zalmay khalilzad and hostage affairs envoy Adam boehler, visited Kabul more than once during the year (2025, Al Jazeera; 2025, Geopolitical Monitor). The analysts have cited the fact that the need for a traditional counterterrorism platform is lessening, and nearness of Bagram to China's strategic assets and its symbolic significance in the U.S.-China competition as the reasons of its revival (Geopolitical Monitor, 2025). The demand was rejected by the Taliban who pointed out 2020 Doha Agreement on Afghanistan which was not to be used or threatened to be used by the United States against the sovereignty of this country (Responsible Statecraft, 2025). This episode reflects the overall trend that, since 2021, U.S. interest in Afghanistan has become more and more defined by great-power competition, rather than as a stand-alone regional issue.

**The Taliban Government and Its Evolution**

In September 2021, the Taliban declared a "caretaker government" under the leadership of Prime Minister Mohammad Hassan Akhund, with the ultimate power given to Supreme Leader Hibatullah Akhundzada (Thomas, 2026). After five years, this government has yet to be officially recognised by any state, including the United States which has repeatedly urged the Taliban to respect the terms of the Doha Agreement 2020, including an inclusive political settlement, safeguarding the rights of women, children, and the media and most importantly, girl's education (Shahnan & Hussain, 2024). None of these have been realised. The omission of women from secondary and higher education, and from employment in most public sectors, is systematic policy of the Taliban and is cited as the biggest hindrance towards normalised international relations (Thomas, 2026). In December 2025, the UN Security Council's reported findings in their Security Council Report noted that the Taliban's stance on international obligations with regard to women and girls was directly contradicted by recommendations contained in an independent assessment of the situation, conducted under the UN's own mandate, and created under the UN's Doha political process convening.

Taliban is not officially recognized, but has some de facto international engagement. It has its embassies or diplomatic missions in a number of countries, it has sent ambassadors to Beijing, and it has had regular direct contact with U.S. officials in Doha and, at times, in Kabul (Thomas, 2026). The government also has engaged in some economic diplomacy, such as mining and trade, discussed below. On the inside, however, the Taliban is experiencing a great deal of stresses to their governance: The economy is still recovering from decades of conflict; there are internal power struggles between more pragmatic and more hardline factions of the Taliban; and there is increased armed opposition from groups such as the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan and the Afghanistan Freedom Front, although UN monitors assessed in 2025 that such attacks are still scattered and are not a serious threat to the Taliban rule (Media, 2025).

**Security and Counterterrorism Concerns**

The most critical issues of limited U.S.–Taliban contacts are security and counterterrorism, and one of the biggest challenges facing the United States after 2021 is the issue of security. In the 2020 Doha Agreement, the Taliban agreed to not use Afghan soil for threats to the United States or its allies (Thomas, 2025). UN assessments, however, suggest that al-Qaeda members, including senior leadership, are still in Afghanistan, which has the potential to become a safe haven for terrorist groups again (8am Media, 2025). ISIS-K is an even more immediate threat.

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The group has launched significant strikes on Taliban and continues to pose a threat to Afghanistan and neighboring nations (According to Amu TV 2026). Meanwhile, the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) with strong ideological connections to the Afghan Taliban is still making attacks within the borders of Pakistan (Britannica, 2026). The increased TTP activity has severely affected the Pakistan-Afghanistan relations and has helped contribute to the military tensions across the border. The developments pose a hard security problem for Washington. The U.S. is still worried about ISIS-K and al-Qaeda, but not the troops in Afghanistan. It depends on intelligence cooperation, diplomacy and limited over-the-horizon capabilities for monitoring and reacting to terrorist threats, however, rather than relying on the military.

**Humanitarian Conditions and Diplomatic Relations**

Afghanistan remains in a critical humanitarian situation. The economy is beginning to recover, but is still fragile and the vast majority of the population (nearly half) continue to require humanitarian assistance (Thomas, 2026). The mass repatriation of Afghan nationals from Iran and Pakistan has added stress to the daily lives of families, affected remittance flows, and put more strains on society. The situation has worsened even more due to natural disasters such as the 2025 earthquakes (Al Jazeera, 2025). The U.S. has not restored ties with the Taliban government or its embassy in Kabul. But Washington engages in a pinhole leak, with envoys and meetings, primarily on topics of security, U.S. citizens detained and other specific issues. In July 2025, though, Russia officially accepted the Taliban government.

**Regional Dynamics**

**Pakistan**

The situation in Pakistan with the Taliban government has altered the most as compared to any other regional country. Islamabad, which had at various stages supported and provided varying levels of assistance to the Taliban during their 20-year insurgency, in 2021 was initially welcoming of the return of the Taliban and encouraged international investment in the new government (Centre for Peace Studies, 2026). That's now a poisonous relationship that's been escalated into a feud. It is suggested by the Pakistan government that the Afghan government has failed to act against the activities of the TTP, which has been known to operate in Afghan "safe havens", resulting in increased violence against Pakistan civilians, particularly in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (International Crisis Group, 2026). Part of the TTP's becoming more lethal has been the use of advanced weapons abandoned by withdrawing U.S. and NATO forces in 2021, estimated at $7.1 billion in weapons originally issued to the Afghan security forces but handed over to the Taliban, and now shared with militant groups, by U.S. oversight bodies (International Crisis Group, 2026). By late 2025 and 2026, this conflict had become a protracted cross-border conflict with both sides claiming military successes and suffering heavy casualties, albeit with the frequent ceasefires, brokered by various countries particularly China facilitated in Urumqi (Centre for Peace Studies, 2026). The burgeoning ties between the two states have also pushed bilateral relations between Pakistan and India to a more volatile and explosive stage and, at least in the Pakistanis' perspective, one more layer of South Asian strategic rivalry (Centre for Peace Studies, 2026).

**China**

China's approach, on the other hand, is very different, and it's pragmatic and security-focused engagement, but no formal recognition. Beijing was the first to extend the invitation to a Taliban-appointed ambassador with the arrival of the Taliban's envoy in the Great Hall of the People in January 2024 and also sent an ambassador to Kabul in September 2023, with the two sides meeting almost every week since then (The

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Diplomat, 2025). China's security concerns are rooted not in its desire for regional normalization in general, but in the worry that Uyghur militant groups, especially the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, would exploit Afghan territory to attack Chinese targets a worry outweighed by other states' emphasis on other aspects of the normalization process, including women's rights (Wilson Center, 2024).

China has pursued such economic interests as granting the state-owned Xinjiang Central Asia Petroleum and Gas Company oil extraction rights in northern Afghanistan in 2023; reopening of an ancient copper mine, Mes Aynak, one of the world's largest copper deposits in Afghanistan, in mid-2024; and granting full customs exemption for Afghan exports to China in December 2024 (Global Voices, 2025; Zan Times, 2025). But the effects of the announcements have been small compared to their scope. In reality, Chinese investment in Afghanistan has declined in three of the past four years since the takeover and critical projects have not been realized in accordance with investment pledges or schedules, such as Amu Darya oil, or the first Amu Darya developer who was expelled from Afghanistan in mid-2025 for lack of deadlines and commitments by the Taliban (Stimson Center, 2025; Carnegie Endowment, 2025). Beijing has also given a role to itself as a regional mediator, notably aiding the Taliban and Pakistan to reach a ceasefire agreement during their conflict in 2025-2026, and supporting a package of regional stability as a precondition to its investment projects, such as Belt and Road Initiative connectivity initiatives involving Afghan territory (Zan Times, 2025).

**Iran**

Iran's ties with the Taliban are mostly pragmatic, with cooperation and significant differences. Both nations are worried about ISIS-K, and have been critical of Israeli and U.S. influence, advocating for “limited cooperation” (The Diplomat, 2025). But there are still disputes regarding water and refugee matters. Conflicts broke out regarding the Helmand River in May 2023, with Iran charging the Taliban with not delivering the water that they had agreed to under the 1973 treaty (Lowy Institute, 2025). In 2025, the two sides kept on going through diplomatic channels to deal with the water dispute and refugee issues, and Iran deported many Afghans. The continued use of the term “temporary rulers” by Tehran speaks to the practical nature of Tehran's engagement with the Taliban rather than their political acceptance (The Diplomat, 2026).

**Central Asia**

All the Central Asian states have started to take divergent stances in policy making on the Taliban largely on the basis of their security interests and economic needs.All the Central Asian states have taken divergent stances on policy making in relation to the Taliban, primarily on the grounds of their economic and security interests. In general, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have been more interested in promoting stability, trade and economic cooperation with the Taliban, and facilitating projects like the TAPI gas pipeline (Thomas, 2025). But Tajikistan is becoming more belligerent and has been having increasing border conflicts with the Taliban. Water conflicts also have taken significance, specifically as the Qosh Tepa Canal may impact water flows downstream to Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan (The Diplomat, 2026). This means that the security, water, trade and economic agendas now also influence regional concerns, more and more than ideology.

**Analytical Discussion**

The developments represent the central argument of the paper, that today U.S.-Afghan relations are no longer "intimate," but have now become "distant, security-related and non-recognitional," and that the region is seeing the emergence of a variety of "subtle and complicated dynamics" among its various players, rather than "any kind of international formula. There are three wider trends in international relations theory that can explain this result. First, the case demonstrates

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that coercive diplomacy without recognition is ultimately limited: a combination of asset freezes and releasing the assets on condition, plus the ability to impose sanctions, is something the United States can do for the Taliban, but so far, it has not done so; and as far as promises of fighting terrorism or human rights violations are concerned, non-recognition has proved a weak instrument of compliance, at least in and of itself (Shahnan & Hussain, 2024). Second, the divergent trajectories of China, Russia, Iran, and Pakistan reveal the pattern typical of "post-intervention" environments, characterized by narrowly self-interested accommodations with a de facto authority, in this case, one that cares more about their own security and economic interests than the regional and near-regional normative preferences that would have defined the conditions of engagement for the West (Wilson Center, 2024). Thirdly, Pakistan's war with Afghanistan in 2025-2026 demonstrates that the security vacuum caused by the U.S. military withdrawal is far from being filled by the U.S. and has expanded in a new dimension that was not as evident in the previous two decades of U.S. military presence (Britannica, 2026).
Washington is in a real quandary. Yet even the fact that Afghanistan has not figured prominently in national security and defense strategy documents in recent years is a sign of a change in emphasis, even if events such as the Bagram controversy and the ongoing presence of al-Qaeda in Kabul shows that Afghanistan is not strategically irrelevant, although it definitely is strategically marginal in Washington policy discussions (Thomas, 2026). It's clear that the U.S. policy on Afghanistan since 2021 has been reactive and ad hoc, as opposed to a structured strategic approach, through the mineral resource issues and the Bagram controversy.

**Conclusion**

Five years after the U.S. withdrawal, relations between Washington and Kabul remain marked by non-recognition, limited security contacts, and reduced diplomatic and humanitarian engagement. At the same time, Afghanistan has become an important arena of regional competition. China has expanded cautious economic and security engagement, while Russia has moved toward formal recognition of the Taliban. Iran and the Central Asian states have adopted pragmatic approaches while facing concerns over refugees, water, borders, and security. Pakistan's relationship with the Taliban has also deteriorated sharply, largely because of the TTP insurgency and cross-border tensions. The United States, meanwhile, has shifted from direct military and development involvement to limited engagement increasingly influenced by wider competition with China. Overall, post-2021 Afghanistan has not returned to complete isolation; instead, its regional order has been reconfigured around competing interests. Future research should examine how the 2025–2026 Pakistan–Afghanistan conflict and renewed U.S. interest in Bagram may reshape this evolving regional balance.

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