

Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations: Can the Future Be Different from the Past?



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Summary:

- The relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan have long been characterized by complexities and challenges. In this report, we delve into the difficult dynamics of these two neighboring nations. The importance of a consistent, consensus-based policy framework is emphasized, with a focus on rectifying historical inconsistencies and fostering engagement with regional stakeholders.
- The pressing need for a clear and effective counterterrorism policy is underscored by the surge in terrorist activities, particularly from Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Regional dynamics are shaped by pivotal forces, with a spotlight on the Taliban's economic interests and geopolitical realities.
- The potential impact of the Afghan refugee policy on bilateral relations is examined, highlighting the need for consensus-driven, consistent policies to optimize outcomes. Navigating potential resistance movements, economic dependencies, human rights concerns, and refraining from terrorism as a policy tool are crucial for the Taliban to function effectively as a state.
- The need for active engagement with the United States and leveraging China's role in maintaining regional stability is underscored, emphasizing the role of strategic diplomatic dialogue. Multilateral efforts involving neighboring countries like China, Russia, and Iran are advocated to address common threats and promote regional stability.
- The report culminates in comprehensive recommendations, urging consistency in policy formulation, increased regional engagement, enhanced counterterrorism strategies, diplomatic dialogue, economic cooperation, and a human rights-focused approach.
- The aim of this report is to guide strategic decision-making, fostering stability and cooperation for enduring peace in the dynamic Pakistan-Afghanistan relationship.

Introduction:

In the complex geopolitical landscape of South Asia, the relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan stands as a linchpin. The Sanober Institute's panel discussion, featuring Dr. Qamar Cheema, Ambassador Aizaz Ahmed Chaudhry, Anas Mallick and Abdul Basit sought to navigate the intricate challenges posed by political transitions, counter-terrorism imperatives, and the urgent need for regional collaboration.

Key Takeaways:

- **Historical Realities and Evolving Dynamics:** Comprehending the historical foundations of the relationship is crucial, urging a nuanced understanding of the Taliban's perspective as a potent regional force. The panel recognized the Taliban's evolving role as a governing entity and stressed the importance of nuanced comprehension.
- **Inconsistencies and the Need for a Consensus-Based Policy:** The necessity of crafting a consistent and consensus-driven policy, addressing historical inconsistencies, was emphasized. The panel advocated for a framework engaging regional stakeholders to navigate the evolving operational environment.
- **TTP and Counterterrorism Challenges:** Delving into the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) as a significant challenge, the discussion underscored the need for a clear counterterrorism policy. Analysis shed light on the surge in terrorist activities within Pakistan and the complexities of dealing with various factions.
- **The Role of External Players:** Insights into the role of external players, particularly India, shaping regional dynamics were provided. The discussion emphasized the pragmatic approach of the Taliban in engaging with countries, regardless of historical animosities, driven by economic interests.
- **Refugee Policy and Its Impact:** The panel further explored the Afghan refugee policy, recognizing its potential impact on bilateral relations. The consensus was that the policy must be consistent and consensus-based, with an acknowledgment that refugees returning to Afghanistan may face challenges due to the lack of pull factors.
- **Taliban's Statehood Challenges:** Articulating that for the Taliban to function effectively as a state, they must address multiple challenges, including potential resistance movements, economic dependencies on neighboring countries, human rights concerns, and refraining from treating terrorism as an instrument of policy.
- **Regional Engagements and Trade Minister Interaction:** An additional insight highlighted the positive engagement between the Afghan Trade Minister Haji Nooruddin Azizi and Pakistani authorities, showcasing a potential compartmentalization of challenges and a willingness to move forward despite ongoing issues.
- **The Impact of External Influences on Taliban Behavior:** The panel touched upon the influence of external actors, such as the United States and China, on shaping the Taliban's behavior. It was noted that economic interests and geopolitical realities drive the Taliban's engagement with nations, showcasing a pragmatic shift.
- **The Role of the U.S. and China in Regional Stability:** Emphasizing the importance of leveraging diplomatic dialogue with the United States, the discussion highlighted the moral obligation of the U.S. and the strategic significance of China in maintaining regional stability.
- **Importance of Engaging with Regional Stakeholders:** The discussion emphasized the critical role of regional engagement in building pressure on the Taliban. This involves leveraging platforms with neighboring countries such as China, Russia, and Iran to collectively address terrorism concerns emanating from Afghanistan.
- **Role of Multilateral Platforms in Ensuring Regional Stability:** The think tank highlighted the significance of active participation in multilateral platforms involving regional stakeholders. This collaborative approach aims to foster stability and build a united front against common threats, such as terrorism.

Recommendations:

- **Consistency and Consensus in Policy Formulation:** A thorough examination of historical documents and geopolitical intricacies is recommended to formulate a consistent and consensus-based policy towards Afghanistan. This approach should involve comprehensive research aimed at deconstructing the Taliban's ideological worldview and mindset, providing policymakers with insights for effective strategy formulation.
- **Regional Engagement and Pressure:** Emphasizing the need for increased regional engagement, the recommendation is to build pressure on the Taliban through platforms involving neighboring countries. Leveraging regional alliances will be crucial to address common concerns related to terrorism and ensure stability in the region.
- **Counterterrorism Strategy and Intelligence Enhancement:** The recommendation is the development and articulation of a clear counterterrorism strategy, taking into account the changing operational environment. Enhancing intelligence capabilities is imperative to effectively tackle terrorism within Pakistan, with a nuanced understanding of emerging factions.
- **Diplomatic Dialogue and International Support:** The recommendation underscores the importance of strengthening diplomatic dialogue with the international community, especially the United States. Seeking not only sympathetic diplomatic voices but also material support will be crucial to address the challenges posed by the evolving situation in Afghanistan.
- **Economic Cooperation and Regional Projects:** Encouraging economic cooperation between Pakistan and Afghanistan is vital. The recommendation suggests identifying common agendas, such as trade, and actively participating in regional projects like the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline and Central Asia-South Asia (CASA) projects.
- **Multilateral Platforms for Regional Stability:** The recommendation advocates for active participation in multilateral platforms involving regional stakeholders to foster collaboration and build a united front against common threats, such as terrorism.
- **Human Rights Advocacy and International Partnerships:** Recognizing the global concern for human rights, the recommendation is active advocacy and partnerships with international organizations to address human rights issues, especially concerning the treatment of women in Afghanistan.
- **Ongoing Assessment of Refugee Policy Impact:** The recommendation suggests continuous assessment and adaptation of the refugee policy impact on bilateral relations. Understanding the nuanced challenges faced by returning refugees and addressing them through diplomatic means will contribute to a stable relationship.

Conclusion:

The Sanober Institute's thought-provoking panel discussion, supplemented by additional insights, provides invaluable perspectives into the intricate dynamics of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. The comprehensive recommendations aim to guide policymakers in navigating the evolving landscape, fostering stability, and ensuring a positive departure from historical patterns in the future relationship between the two nations. As the geopolitical chessboard continues to shift, strategic and informed decision-making is imperative for regional peace, prosperity, and enduring cooperation.