



“SECURITY CONCERNS AND DIPLOMATIC DILEMMAS : AFGHANISTAN-PAKISTAN RELATIONS AND CHALLENGES OF ILLEGAL MIGRANTS”

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Abstract: The intricate web of Afghanistan-Pakistan relations is fraught with various challenges, prominently marked by security concerns and diplomatic dilemmas. The article delves into the intricate dynamics of these neighbouring nations, primarily focusing on the pressing issue of illegal migration. As Afghanistan undergoes political transitions and security fluctuations, its citizens seek refuge across the border in Pakistan, intensifying the strain on diplomatic ties. The porous nature of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border amplifies security challenges, with both nations grappling to address the influx of undocumented migrants.

Security concerns emanate not only from the inflow of illegal migrants but also from the potential exploitation of this situation by extremist elements such as terrorism, further complicating regional stability. The two nations face dilemmas in formulating cooperative strategies to manage the migration crisis while addressing historical tensions and conflicting geopolitical interests. The article aims to suggest collaborative practices between both the countries, considering the shared socio-economic challenges and the imperative of maintaining regional peace in South Asia.

The academic landscape of Afghanistan-Pakistan relations, sheds light on the intricate interplay between security considerations, diplomatic intricacies, and the humanitarian dimension of managing the challenges posed by illegal migration.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Pakistan, South Asia, Migration, Security, Terrorism, Regionalism

INTRODUCTION:

“Two years since the Taliban took over Afghanistan, ties between the neighbours have deteriorated amid a rise in armed attacks.”¹

-ALJAZEERA, 17th August, 2023

The complicated relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan has been marked by historical, cultural, and geopolitical complexities. Both nations share porous borders, ethnic ties, and a shared history, yet their relations have been scared by security concerns and diplomatic dilemmas. The porous border between Afghanistan and Pakistan stretches for 2,400 kilometres, serving as a critical pathway for trade, cultural exchange, and unfortunately, also illegal migration. The complex geo-political landscape of the region, marked by decades of conflict and instability in Afghanistan, has intensified security concerns and diplomatic tensions between the two neighbouring countries. The relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan is scrutinised by the challenges posed by illegal migration and its implications for regional security and diplomatic efforts.

Migration has been an integral concept in the history of Afghanistan where civilians migrated in search of better basic necessities, stability, business and employment. Regular conflicts and instability in the region has forced people to migrate internally and externally. Pashtuns and Hazaras major ethnic groups of Afghanistan have crossed into Pakistan. At the same time ethnic groups were migrating to Iran which gave rise in exchange of cultural, religious, and ethnic migratory routes.

The Saur Revolution and the arrival of Soviets into Afghanistan resulted in the world's largest displacement which eventually created a large pool of Afghan refugees in all the neighbouring countries. Displaced people though given assistance through various programmes have not actually been able to consummate the challenge of illegal migration, there are several reasons to this failure, first is the prevailing instability in Afghanistan, repatriation policies, and the unwillingness of the Afghan refugees to return to their unsteady future in their homeland.²

However, host countries such as Pakistan and Iran continue to face diplomatic dilemmas and security concerns that have consequences in the South Asian's Regional peace.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT:

The historical backdrop of Afghanistan-Pakistan relations is shaped by shared historical, cultural, and religious ties, but also marred by periods of tension. Both the countries were part of the British Indian empire during the 19th and 20th centuries, the Durand Line, a border demarcation drawn in 1893 by the British colonial authorities, serves as the de facto border between the two nations. Afghanistan has never officially recognized this border, leading to periodic disputes that continue to strain relations. In fact, Afghanistan was the only country to vote against Pakistan's admission to the United Nations in 1947 due to unresolved issues over the Durand Line.

The world has seen several events that have changed its dynamics, geopolitical strategies, relations with the neighbouring countries and their national interest. South Asia has not been in aloof, events happening worldwide had its consequences in defining the relations between the south Asian countries. Afghanistan and Pakistan relations are also the outcome of their national interest during the cold war era and beyond. Some major decisions of both the countries are listed below;

Soviet Invasion and Mujahideen Era: The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and subsequent United States support for the Afghan Mujahideen had a profound impact on regional dynamics of South Asia. Pakistan played a crucial role in supporting the Mujahideen, fostering close ties with the forces of the United States. However, the post-Soviet era witnessed the rise of the Taliban, bringing a new set of challenges for regional stability.

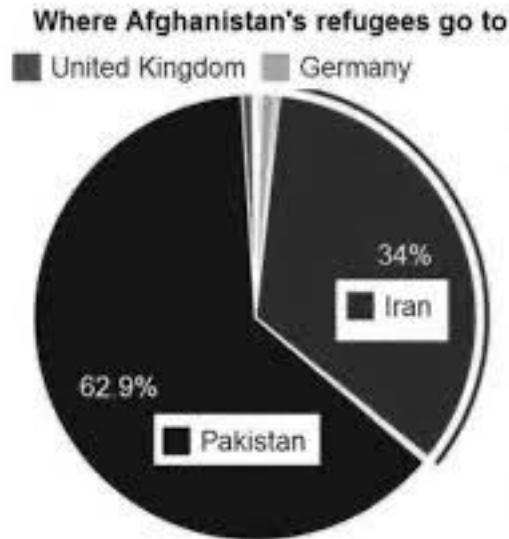
The Taliban Regime and Its Fallout: The Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in the 1990s further complicated Afghanistan-Pakistan relations. While Pakistan officially recognized the Taliban government, its support for the group drew international criticism. The Taliban's sheltering of Al-Qaeda and the subsequent 9/11 attacks led to a paradigm shift in global geopolitics, with the United States launching military operations in Afghanistan.

Post-9/11 Era and the War on Terror: The post-9/11 era saw a shift in Afghanistan-Pakistan relations as Pakistan became a key ally in the U.S.-led War on Terror. However, allegations of cross-border terrorism and sanctuaries for militant groups strained relations. The drone strikes in the border regions fuelled anti-American sentiment in Pakistan, adding another layer of complexity to the bilateral relationship.³

CHALLENGES OF ILLEGAL MIGRATION:

It is essential to understand the meaning of the terms refugee and migrants before starting this section. Refugee is a person who is outside their country of nationality and unable or unwilling to use that country's protection because of a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion; or a person who is not a nationality and who, as a result of such events, is outside the country of his former habitual residence and is unable or unwilling to return there.⁴

The beginning of the 1960s, rural-urban migration became predominant in and around Afghanistan with the need for development and better living standards forcing civilians to migrate internally and externally. Over the years, Pashtuns, one of the major ethnic groups, spread out in large numbers, and other ethnic groups such as the Hazaras crossed into Pakistan for trade and transit. Large scale labour migration of Afghans into Iran also took place regularly, culminating in an exchange of cultural, religious and ethnic migratory routes.⁵



Pie chart depicting the outflow of Afghan population to neighbouring countries⁶

The influx of illegal migrants across the Afghan-Pakistan border creates a myriad of challenges beyond security and diplomatic concerns. The lack of proper documentation hinders access to basic services such as healthcare and education for both migrants and host communities. Additionally, it creates an informal economy, often exploitative and prone to criminal activity.

The instability and interference of external actors in the region left little scope for the growth of both the countries. Taliban 1.0 (1996-2001) and Taliban 2.0 (2022 onwards) in Afghanistan gave no choice to the people but to seek refuge in neighbouring countries. In contemporary times as reported by Aljazeera “According to the Pakistani government, there were about 4 million foreigners in the country before October 31, nearly 3.8 million of them Afghans. Of those, it says, only 2.2 million Afghans carry a government-approved document that makes them eligible to stay.”⁷

It is essential to understand the reasons of illegal migration and its effect on the relations between the two countries;

- i. **Cross-Border Mobility:** The porous border between Afghanistan and Pakistan has facilitated the movement of people, contributing to the challenge of illegal migration. The lack of effective border control mechanisms has allowed the undocumented movement of individuals, posing security concerns for both nations.
- ii. **Economic and Political Instability:** Afghanistan's prolonged periods of conflict and political instability have driven its citizens to seek refuge in neighbouring countries, including Pakistan. The economic hardships and lack of opportunities in Afghanistan push individuals to migrate illegally in search of better prospects.
- iii. **Refugee Crisis:** The influx of Afghan refugees into Pakistan has been a longstanding issue. The Afghan refugee crisis, exacerbated by conflicts and economic challenges, has strained Pakistan's resources and infrastructure, leading to social and economic challenges within the country.
- iv. **Terrorist Infiltration:** The border has also been exploited by militant groups, facilitating the cross-border movement of terrorists. This has raised concerns about national security in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, as terrorist elements find sanctuary and support networks on either side of the border.
- v. **Social integration** presents another challenge. Cultural differences and linguistic barriers can lead to isolation and marginalisation of migrant communities. Furthermore, the perception of illegal migrants as a burden on local resources can fuel social tensions and discrimination.

DIPLOMATIC DELIMMASs:

Addressing the challenges posed by illegal migration requires a collaborative approach from both Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, diplomatic relations between the two countries have often been strained, plagued by historical mistrust and accusations of harbouring militant groups. This lack of trust impedes cooperation and hinders the implementation of effective border management strategies.

The issue of refugee status and return mechanisms remains a contentious point. Pakistan, already hosting millions of Afghan refugees, is reluctant to accept further influxes, while Afghanistan struggles to reintegrate returning migrants due to its own economic and security challenges. Finding a sustainable solution for repatriation and resettlement programs requires delicate diplomatic negotiations and mutual

understanding. About 5.7 million refugees have willingly returned to Afghanistan over the past ten years, with primary assistance from the UNHCR. In spite of this, 2.7 million Afghans still reside in neighbouring countries as refugees.⁸

Some dilemmas hindering smooth diplomatic relations are mentioned below;

- i. **Durand Line Dispute:** The historical dispute over the Durand Line continues to be a diplomatic dilemma, with Afghanistan refusing to recognize it as the official border. Resolving this issue would require delicate negotiations and compromise from both nations, as it involves historical grievances, questions of sovereignty and rights of the refugees involved.
- ii. **Terrorism Allegations:** Accusations of harbouring and supporting terrorist groups strain diplomatic ties. Both nations accuse each other of sponsoring terrorism, leading to a lack of trust and cooperation. Addressing these allegations requires a commitment to counterterrorism efforts and intelligence sharing.
- iii. **Role of External Actors:** The involvement of external factors, such as the United States, China, and India, adds another layer of complexity to Afghanistan-Pakistan relations. Balancing competing interests and navigating the geopolitical landscape requires adept diplomacy to ensure regional stability.
- iv. **Refugee Management:** Effectively managing the refugee crisis necessitates diplomatic collaboration. Coordinated efforts are required to address the humanitarian aspects of the crisis, provide support for repatriation, and implement long-term solutions to reduce the dependence on illegal migration.

REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS:

The security concerns and diplomatic dilemmas between Afghanistan and Pakistan have far-reaching implications for South Asian stability. The spill over effect of conflicts, terrorism, and migration can destabilise the entire region, affecting neighbouring countries. China's growing economic and strategic interests in the region, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative, add a new dimension to the dynamics. Balancing the interests of China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan requires nuanced diplomacy to avoid exacerbating existing tensions. Nevertheless, Indo-Pak Relations are affected by the Afghanistan-Pakistan relationship, the rivalry which is now hard to mend. India's involvement in Afghanistan and its support for certain factions complicate regional dynamics, requiring careful diplomacy to prevent further escalation. This geopolitical strategy has made two blocks in the region, one consisting of Pakistan and China while the other one of India, Afghanistan and the United States. This block formation does not necessarily mean that the Taliban Government is accepted by the countries.

SECURITY CONCERNS:

The influx of illegal migrants crossing the Afghan-Pakistan border has fuelled the fire of existing security concerns in both countries. Terrorist groups, operating in the volatile terrain of Afghanistan, often exploit the porous border to infiltrate Pakistan, perpetrating attacks and destabilising the region. The presence of undocumented migrants, potentially harbouring criminal intent, further complicates law enforcement efforts, making it challenging to track and apprehend suspects. The point of concern is whether it is the fruit of what Pakistan sowed in the late 1970s. The decision was made by the Pakistani government in an effort to advance its military, economic, and diplomatic standing abroad. Most significantly, Pakistan gave weapons, training, and financial support to Afghan refugees who voluntarily fought the Soviet Union. This support was further made possible by the United States and other Muslim nations like Saudi Arabia.²

For Pakistan, the influx of Afghan refugees and undocumented migrants raises concerns about demographic shifts and potential social unrest. The fear of losing jobs and straining resources fuels anti-immigrant sentiment, creating a tense social atmosphere. Additionally, the presence of militant groups within the refugee population poses a significant security threat, requiring Pakistan to invest heavily in border security and surveillance measures. On the other hand, Afghanistan grapples with demographic loss, which resulted in loss of skilled labour and professionals due to illegal migration. This brain drain hampers economic development and further hinders the fragile Afghan state in rebuilding its infrastructure and institutions. Moreover, the lack of proper documentation and registration mechanisms exposes Afghan migrants to exploitation and abuse, leaving them vulnerable in host countries.

SEEKING SOLUTIONS:

Addressing the challenges posed by illegal migration necessitates a multi-pronged approach. Firstly, both Afghanistan and Pakistan need to strengthen border security measures through joint patrols, intelligence sharing, and technological advancements. This will deter human trafficking and terrorist infiltration while facilitating legitimate cross-border trade and movement.

Secondly, creating legal pathways for migration and refugee resettlement programs is crucial. Streamlining visa procedures and establishing quotas for skilled Afghan workers can provide safe and regulated migration channels, alleviating pressure on the porous border. Additionally,

international cooperation is essential in supporting Afghanistan's reconstruction efforts and creating conditions conducive to the safe and voluntary return of refugees.

Thirdly, promoting social integration and intercultural understanding is crucial. Community outreach programs, language classes, and cultural exchange initiatives can foster understanding and acceptance between migrant communities and host populations. Addressing the economic and social concerns of local communities surrounding refugee camps can help mitigate tensions and facilitate peaceful coexistence.

Both the countries will have to follow counter-terrorism practices in order to limit terrorist activities in the region which will not only provide stability but will also work as a trust-building mechanism. Pakistan is one of the two nuclear powers in South Asia which makes it accountable, credible, responsible and answerable about its military pathways.

CONCLUSION:

The challenges posed by illegal migration across the Afghan-Pakistan border demand immediate and collaborative action. Security concerns, diplomatic tensions, and the plight of the migrants themselves necessitate a comprehensive approach that prioritises border security, legal pathways for migration, and social integration. Only through cooperation, mutual understanding, and a commitment to addressing the root causes of migration can Afghanistan and Pakistan find a sustainable solution to this complex issue, paving the way for a more stable and prosperous future for both nations.

One of the biggest humanitarian operations in history has been in response to the Afghan refugee crisis. Through the administration of refugee camps, the UNHCR has played a crucial role in providing aid, providing a haven, and facilitating the repatriation of Afghan refugees to Iran and Pakistan. The UNHCR has amassed \$1,000 in foreign donations over the years to cover the expense of each repatriation. Refugees sought sanctuary in various countries across the globe, such as Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, and Denmark, during the civil wars in Afghanistan. In addition, the refugees' preference to go to Pakistan or Iran was largely influenced by their political affiliation, religious sect, and ethnic background. ¹⁰

The challenges posed by illegal migration amplify relationship complexities, impacting regional stability and security. Resolving these issues requires diplomatic finesse, commitment to counterterrorism, and international cooperation to address the root causes of conflict and displacement. This forced displacement either in form of refugees or illegal migration not only hampers the relations among the countries but can be understood as a humanitarian crisis on the weaker sections of the society like women and children. Hunger, poverty, improper sanitization and lack of residential properties are basic necessities of any individuals which are often not provided by the host countries, because it is an over-burden on the host government. This phenomenon can be understood by the recent example of Pakistan sending undocumented Afghan refugees (falls under the category of illegal migrants) back as they are burden to the government but as the world navigates an evolving geopolitical landscape, finding sustainable solutions to the challenges between Afghanistan and Pakistan is crucial for fostering peace and stability in South Asia.

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