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## An Analytical Study of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf's Foreign Policy Towards Afghanistan (2018 – 2022)

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### Abstract

This study examines Pakistan's foreign policy towards Afghanistan during the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government from 2018 to 2022. The PTI government played a pivotal role in Pakistan's diplomatic engagement with Afghanistan, including the Doha Agreement 2020 and the withdrawal of NATO forces. The research situates Pakistan's policy within its historical and regional context to assess evolving cross-border dynamics. A qualitative research approach was adopted, including Primary data from official statements by the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan and Afghanistan, as well as reports from Dawn and Tolo News. Secondary sources comprised academic journals, books, research articles, dissertations, and newspapers. The data were analyzed using a systematic six-step thematic analysis framework. The findings indicate that the PTI government prioritized peacebuilding, regional stability, economic cooperation, and counter terrorism efforts. Challenges such as economic mismanagement and institutional weaknesses persisted. However, strong institutional coordination will strengthen future policy toward Afghanistan. It can further benefit areas such as economic and trade connectivity, including sustained diplomatic engagement and a consistent mechanism for addressing border and security challenges.

**Keywords:** Foreign policy, Pak-Afghan relations, PTI government, Regional dynamics.

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## Introduction

Immediately after the Second World War, the United Kingdom took the initiative to roll back its direct imperial rule from its colonies; the Sub-continent was partitioned into two major states, Pakistan and India, which came into existence in 1947. Pakistan has inherited many challenges and disputes since its inception. One of the most severe is the territorial dispute with Afghanistan and India. Due to its opposition to the validity of the Durand Line agreement – signed between Kabul and British India in 1893. After 1947, Afghanistan became the only country to oppose Pakistan's membership of the United Nations. This sowed the seed of conflict and hate between two brotherly states. It is no surprise that differences at the time dominated Afghanistan-Pakistan relations. They grew significantly as Afghanistan moved closer to Pakistan's arch-enemy, India. This led to Pakistan's dominance of the strategic depth approach vis-à-vis Afghanistan. Consequently, Pakistan decided to establish relations with Afghan Islamists outfits and provided various forms of support against the Soviet war for the US. However, the desire for a friendly regime in Kabul was not realized until the establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) in 1996, as Pakistan also played a key role in ending the civil war within Afghanistan.

After that, between 2018 and 2022, this relationship underwent a significant transformation due to numerous regional events, including global geopolitical shifts and domestic political changes. Key events during this period included Pakistan's diplomatic facilitation of the U.S.–Taliban negotiations, the Doha Agreement (2020), the withdrawal of NATO forces in 2021, and the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan, which took place simultaneously. These developments placed Pakistan at the centre of regional attention, attracting both praise for its peacebuilding efforts and criticism for alleged support to the Taliban and intervention in their internal affairs (Fair, 2014). Pakistan's foreign policy key objectives during this period emphasized regional stability, counter-terrorism, national security, and economic interests. Strategic competition with India also influenced Islamabad's policy, with limited skirmishes taking place during this government era. Afghanistan was perceived as a critical buffer state, with concerns over Indian influence and infrastructure in the region (Grare, 2013). Pakistan engaged with global powers—including the U.S., China, and Russia—and participated in multilateral forums to promote humanitarian assistance and prevent Afghanistan from becoming a safe and hidden haven for non-state actors.

While Pakistan primarily focuses on its geopolitical gains vis-à-vis India in the shape of the Afghan Taliban's return to Kabul, the developments since the Taliban's takeover have brought serious security challenges for Pakistan unexpectedly. Besides, the resurgence of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Islamic State-Khorasan Province has also increased terrorist attacks in different regions of Pakistan, particularly near border-connected areas, as both terrorist groups have a strong presence in Afghanistan and training camps and heavily rely on their workforce. Islamabad has no other option but to work with the Taliban regime to pursue the negotiation process and secure its national interest in the long term. The rising terrorism in

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Pakistan since August 2021 is a burning security challenge to the state of Pakistan and the region. Public institutions and other political entities must address this challenge holistically to establish lasting peace in the region and strengthen economic and trade ties multilaterally.

This paper focuses on how Pakistan has responded to its growing terrorism problem. The study argues that a variety of domestic and external factors influence Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts, including its own political instability, gaps in policy implementation and lack of political will, its relationship with the Taliban and a political settlement with the TTP. After all, the paper adopts a qualitative approach, analyzing primary sources, including official statements from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan and Afghanistan, as well as media coverage from *Dawn* and *Tolo News*. The research examines the interplay of geopolitical, security, and socio-economic factors that shaped Pakistan's foreign policy during the PTI government.

### **Problem Statement**

Previous studies have focused on a wide range of challenges and bilateral relationships within a historical context. However, limited attention has been given to a systematic assessment and analysis of the many events and incidents that took place and produced many outcomes during 2018-2022. In particular, these events occurred during the PTI government's 2018–2022 tenure. This period coincided with critical regional and bilateral developments, including the U.S.–Taliban negotiations, the Doha Agreement (2020), the withdrawal of NATO forces, and the Taliban's return to power. The absence of focused academic observation and analysis creates a research gap in understanding these current developments in the region. In this scenario, the research study focuses on how the PTI government navigated these developments. It examines how the ruling administration maintained equilibrium amid domestic and international pressures and shaped Pakistan's diplomatic, security, and economic engagement with Afghanistan while keeping an eye on security challenges from the state. This study seeks to address this gap by systematically examining Pakistan's foreign policy and analyzing the key dynamics that influence and favor Pakistan's interests under the PTI government during this specific tenure of the ruling party, and to reveal its outcomes. Within a single analytical framework, it integrates these dimensions by particularly focusing on the PTI tenure. The unique aspect of this study is that it provides a period-specific and comprehensive understanding of Pakistan's evolving policy towards Afghanistan and future challenges in regional politics.

### **Research Questions**

1. What were the key features of Pakistan's foreign policy towards Afghanistan during the PTI government (2018–2022)?
2. How did the PTI administration respond to major regional developments, including the Doha Agreement and the NATO withdrawal?

3. What strengths and limitations characterized Pakistan's foreign policy under Prime Minister Imran Khan?
4. How did the PTI government prioritize peace, regional stability, and economic cooperation in its Afghanistan policy?
5. What are the key achievements of the PTI government during its tenure in the context of Pakistan's foreign policy towards Afghanistan?

### **Research Objective**

1. To examine the key features and priorities of Pakistan's Afghanistan policy under the PTI administration.
2. To analyze Pakistan's diplomatic role in the U.S.–Taliban negotiations and the Doha Agreement (2020).
3. To assess the impact of regional developments, including the NATO withdrawal and the Taliban takeover, on Pakistan's foreign policy.
4. To identify the strengths and weaknesses of Pakistan's foreign policy approach during Prime Minister Imran Khan's tenure.
5. To evaluate the extent to which peace, regional stability, and economic cooperation were prioritized in Pakistan's Afghanistan policy.

### **Significance of the Study**

The study provides a focused and period-specific analysis that contributes to the literature on Pakistan's foreign policy under the PTI government toward Afghanistan during 2018-2022. It covers significant policy shifts and events that occurred during this period, such as the withdrawal of NATO forces, the Doha Agreement and the Taliban taking over Kabul. This study provides a multilateral framework for understanding humanitarian, economic, security and diplomatic efforts and considerations related to Afghanistan. This study reveals practical relevance for many domains of expertise, such as security practitioners, policymakers, diplomats and analysts. It further highlights key areas of constraints and opportunities regarding Pakistan's policy toward Afghanistan. Therefore, this analysis identifies key areas that require rigorous attention, such as regional economic and trade connectivity, counterterrorism cooperation and diplomatic diversification at the institutional level. Furthermore, the study encourages comparative future research on Pakistan's policy toward Afghanistan and provides a basis for broader academic discussion regarding future security concerns, peacebuilding and bilateral relations.

### **Literature Review**

The existing body of literature on Pakistan-Afghanistan relations offers valuable insights into historical patterns, geopolitical challenges, and a series of negotiations, efforts, and cooperation. However, the transitional period between 2018 and 2022, marked by significant events such as the Afghan peace process, the U.S. troops' withdrawal, and the Taliban's return

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to power, has received comparatively less scholarly attention. This literature review examines key sources, including academic journals, research papers, official foreign ministry statements, and media coverage, to comprehensively understand the dynamics during this period.

The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government, led by Prime Minister Imran Khan, held office from July 2018 to April 2022. They engaged in conversations and negotiations with the Afghan administration on a set of exclusive priorities and policies tailored to regional dynamics, the evolving global security framework, and Pakistan's strategic interests. This paper offers a critical analysis of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government's foreign policy towards Afghanistan, exploring key policy actions, evaluating their effectiveness, and identifying across-the-board themes and goals that guided these decisions. Naturally, India remains Pakistan's key security problem, but relations with Afghanistan have been affecting Pakistan's security dynamics. Moreover, Afghanistan's domestic dynamics and state fragility allow the presence and growth of terrorist organizations. It continues to create security problems for Pakistan.

Another key source of conflict between these two states is differences over the validity of the Durand Line agreement, which led to a conflictual start of the Afghanistan-Pakistan relationship that got more challenging after Afghanistan's attacks in ex-FATA and Balochistan in the 1950s. When the former president of Afghanistan, Daoud Khan, ousted King Zahir Shah in 1973, Pakistan faced a major challenge in the shape of a prominent advocate of Pashtunistan in Kabul. This event had drastically affected the bilateral relationship as Khan began supporting Pashtun and Baloch groups in Pakistan. It eventually resulted in a policy shift in Pakistan. Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's government established an 'Afghan Cell' within Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and began imitating relations with anti-Daoud politicians like Burhanuddin Rabbani.

Moreover, statements from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan and Afghanistan offer first-hand insights into the evolving bilateral relationship. For instance, Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs highlighted its role as a facilitator in the U.S.-Taliban peace negotiations, emphasizing its commitment to regional stability. On the other hand, Afghanistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs often expressed skepticism towards Pakistan's intentions and actions, accusing it of harboring insurgent groups ("MOFA Afghanistan," 2020). These contrasting narratives reveal the complexity of trust-building efforts and underscore the need for a balanced approach to analysing bilateral policies.

Rubin (2002), in *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, provides a historical perspective on Afghanistan's geopolitics, emphasizing the role of external powers, including Pakistan, in shaping the country's destiny. The work offers a foundational understanding of Pakistan's strategic concerns but lacks a perpetual peace solution and addresses the post-2018 developments. Although this historical foundation can provide sufficient insights and test

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events in the laboratory of history, it further strengthens the peace process and negotiation process between the two states. Fair (2014), in *Fighting to the End*, critically analyzes Pakistan's military and foreign policy strategies, suggesting that Pakistan's perspective on Afghanistan is deeply rooted in its India-centric security paradigm. This aligns with the view that Pakistan's engagement in Afghanistan often prioritizes countering Indian influence over fostering bilateral trust. It could be understood through the security dilemma paradigm, where Pakistan seeks to strengthen bilateral relations between brotherly states and counter the influence of the enemy state in the region.

Khan (2021) explores Pakistan's evolving Afghan policy, noting a shift from overt support for the Taliban to a more nuanced strategy of diplomatic facilitation. The study underscores Pakistan's dual objectives of maintaining influence in Afghanistan while addressing the domestic security threats posed by militant groups like TTP. Factions in the banned and other ideological organizations also pose a threat to the security of the region and especially to Pakistan, including the newly born Afghanistan Taliban administration. Grare (2013) argues that Afghanistan's stability is crucial for Pakistan's internal security, noting that unresolved border issues and the refugee crisis have long-term implications for both countries. The study emphasizes the need for cooperative mechanisms, a theme that resonates with the challenges of the transitional period. Further, it raises concerns for the business and trade community, which also affects massive populations on both sides, creating other unrest situations and challenges for the states.

Shah (2021) examines the international dimensions of the Afghan peace process, highlighting Pakistan's critical role in mediating between the Taliban and the U.S. The work notes that while Pakistan received global recognition for its efforts, it faced domestic criticism for perceived overreach in Afghan affairs and interventions in internal state matters. Although most of these matters were unavoidable, they were part of the negotiation and other processes. Dawn News provides Pakistan's perspective on bilateral relations, frequently highlighting Islamabad's diplomatic efforts and challenges in dealing with the evolving Afghan political landscape (Dawn, 2020). It often portrayed Pakistan's involvement as constructive, an advocate of peacebuilding ally, though it occasionally criticised the lack of long-term planning.

Reflecting Afghan perspectives, Tolo News often criticized Pakistan's alleged support for the Taliban while acknowledging its role in the peace process (Tolo News, 2020). The coverage underscores the divergent narratives that shaped public and political perceptions in both countries, reflecting public opinion and stakeholders' influence. Now let us see what has happened since the Taliban's takeover, with a focus on Pakistan's role. Diplomatically, Pakistan remains the most important actor as Islamabad has been lobbying for more international support for Afghanistan to avoid any humanitarian crisis. In this regard, Pakistan has been relying on other Muslim states. It has organized two events of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), including the 17th session of the emergency meeting of the OIC's

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Council of Foreign Ministers in December 2021. Afghanistan was a key focus of the emergency meeting in which Pakistan demanded more aid for Afghanistan. Islamabad had pledged US\$28 million in humanitarian aid, including 50,000 metric tons of food and medical supplies. Pakistan has also allowed aid from India to go by land through its territory to Afghanistan.

Other reports from organizations such as the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) and the International Crisis Group (ICG) provide a broader geopolitical context. USIP (2020) highlighted Pakistan's strategic interests in a stable but compliant Afghanistan, whereas ICG (2021) emphasized the humanitarian and security challenges following the Taliban's takeover. These reports underscore the interplay of regional and global factors in shaping Pakistan-Afghanistan relations and the region's changing security and economic dynamics.

### **Research Methodology**

The research methodology section comprises various portions, such as research design, which portrays the overall research content with various component functions. After that, data collection is discussed; it explains how data was collected and which sources were researched and consulted, providing a detailed overview of that portion of the methodology. Along with data analysis, it mentions how the data was analyzed and which techniques, methods and tools were utilized. Following ethical considerations, as per the research rules and principles, and finally findings and discussion, the study concludes the results of the research thoroughly and comprehensively in a systematic way per the principles of research methodology.

### **Research Design**

A qualitative research design has been adopted in this study to explore Pakistan's foreign policy toward Afghanistan under the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government from 2018 to 2022. This approach is considered more relevant and appropriate for several reasons, such as political developments, security concerns, policy decisions and official diplomatic narratives. However, regional dynamics require contextual interpretation rather than numerical measurement and are specifically focused on these dimensions of the selected periods of these two states.

### **Data Collection**

This research study has utilized both primary and secondary documentary sources. Several publicly available official statements have been included in the primary sources, such as policy documents, press releases, diplomatic communications and speeches issued by the Foreign Affairs Ministries of Pakistan and Afghanistan during this period, 2018-2022. Additionally, published reports and news by authentic organizations, such as *Dawn* and *Tolo News*, have also been critically examined for bilateral and regional developments. In secondary sources of data for this research study, several sources have been examined and consulted. These include

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academic books, research reports, peer-reviewed journal articles, dissertations and relevant scholarly publications that have addressed these core issues during this period and in contextual history.

- (a) Directly addressed Pakistan's foreign policy towards Afghanistan or their relationships.
- (b) It provided a historical background context where the PTI government tenure could be interpreted accurately.
- (c) Security, economic, diplomatic and regional dimensions have been examined and analyzed in the light of practical and relevant information through authentic sources. During the literature search and data collection, many irrelevant sources and those lacking sufficient authorship or publication information were excluded.

### **Data Validation**

Wherever possible, to validate the documentary evidence, information was cross-checked across various sources to enhance the reliability and authenticity of the data. In this research study, official government documents have been prioritized for statements concerning government policy and diplomatic positions. On the other hand, for theoretical issues and broader political interpretation, academic publications have been utilized to contextualize these core areas. Further, for contemporary events and developments, reports and news from many established media outlets have been primarily verified. To strengthen the credibility of the findings, this process helped us reduce dependency on a single source and avoid any unauthentic or misinformation.

### **Data Coding**

A six-step framework has been utilized for this qualitative data using a thematic analysis structure. (1) The researcher gets familiarized with the data closely. (2) Initial codes have been generated. (3) Next, in this step, we have identified some potential themes. (4) The identified themes have been reviewed critically. (5) The themes have been defined and named here. (6) Finally, the findings have been reported and interpreted accurately and appropriately.

During this coding process, the researcher primarily focused on periodic issues, such as the Afghan peace process, economic cooperation, diplomatic engagement, border management, peacebuilding and counterterrorism and domestic constraints. Further, these categories were used as analytical areas through which recurring patterns in the documentary evidence could be examined.

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## **Ethical Considerations**

In this study, no direct ethical risks were involved due to the exclusion of any participation-related source. It exclusively relies on publicly available documentary sources. Any human-interaction source, such as surveys, interviews or personally identifiable information, has been excluded. The researcher strictly followed academic principles and integrity in providing content from sources, with appropriate citations and clear demarcation between primary and secondary sources of data and interpretation.

## **Findings and Discussion**

The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf's government foreign policy towards Afghanistan from 2018 to 2022 represented a nuanced combination of strategic restraint, diplomatic engagement, and ideological undertones. This period was marked by significant geopolitical upheavals, especially the U.S. withdrawal and the Taliban's return to power. The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf's government sought to redefine Pakistan's approach by emphasizing regional cooperation, minimizing direct military involvement, and advocating a humanitarian-centric response to Afghanistan's crisis.

One of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf's notable achievements was its diplomatic acumen in navigating the evolving Afghan reality. Prime Minister Imran Khan's government attempted to act as a peace facilitator, particularly during the intra-Afghan dialogue process and subsequent regional forums, such as the OIC Foreign Ministers' meeting (Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA, 2021). However, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf's approach, grounded in rational strategic goals—such as border stability, trade normalization, and counter-terrorism—was limited by its over-reliance on the Taliban's promises, a lack of actionable foresight, and weak institutional capacity to adapt to rapid change (Yousaf, 2022).

Security threats, especially from the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, surged in the aftermath of the Taliban's takeover. The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf's hope that a friendly Taliban regime would contain Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan proved misplaced, undermining Pakistan's internal security posture (Rana, 2022). Additionally, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf's refugee management efforts, although primarily humanitarian, were hindered by economic constraints and regional instability, particularly in provinces such as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan (UNHCR, 2021).

The Ideological affinity with the Taliban, demonstrated in public statements and media posturing, blurred the distinction between diplomatic pragmatism and ideological endorsement. This weakness led to criticism from international actors and confusion within domestic policy circles (Hashim, 2022; Rafiq, 2021). The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf's government struggled to maintain a straightforward narrative that distinguished national interests from religious sentiments, weakening its credibility on global platforms. In

conclusion, while Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf's Afghan policy made several constructive diplomatic moves, it lacked the institutional consistency, strategic foresight, and regional inclusivity required for a sustainable policy model. The experience highlights the necessity for a balanced, multifaceted, and non-ideological approach to Afghanistan that aligns with Pakistan's long-term national interests.

Pakistan's foreign policy toward Afghanistan during the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf's tenure was characterized by a combination of opportunities and restrictions, driven by an often unstable regional perspective. Border security, refugee management, the Taliban's resurgence, economic instability, and complex international alliances each presented unique challenges that tested the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf's government capacity to formulate and implement coherent foreign policy strategies. Addressing these challenges demanded not only strategic foresight and diplomatic rapidity but also domestic agreement and international cooperation. The experience highlighted the challenges of managing a complex bilateral relationship in a region characterized by ideological divisions, historical grievances, and shifting power dynamics.

Nonetheless, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf's regional diplomatic efforts, particularly the successful hosting of the OIC summit, marked a notable attempt to shift from merely bilateral dealings with Afghanistan to a multilateral approach focused on humanitarian leadership. It was a step in the right direction, but its limited outcomes reveal the structural constraints Pakistan faces in translating its diplomatic initiatives into concrete action.

### Evaluation of Policy Outcomes

| Policy Area          | Achievement                                     | Challenges                                             |
|----------------------|-------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| Peace Mediation      | Successfully facilitated the U.S.-Taliban deal  | Failed to engage all Afghan factions equally           |
| Border Security      | Effective fencing progress                      | Diplomatic rifts with the Taliban and tribes           |
| Humanitarian Aid     | Continued refugee support                       | Insufficient international aid burden-sharing          |
| Recognition Strategy | Balanced approach aligned with global consensus | Perceived Taliban bias damaged relations with the West |
| Economic Integration | Proposed regional connectivity projects         | Limited implementation due to Afghan instability       |

*Source: Authors' own analysis, developed from the findings and documentary evidence examined in the present study.*

Pakistan's government under the (PTI) administration was marked by significant geopolitical upheavals, especially the U.S. withdrawal and the Taliban's return to power. The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government attempted to redefine Pakistan's approach by emphasising

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regional cooperation, minimising direct military involvement, and advocating for a humanitarian-centric response to Afghanistan's crisis.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this research study revealed that Pakistan's foreign policy toward Afghanistan during the PTI government in 2018-2022 was shaped by several core areas, such as the interaction of security interests, economic considerations, diplomatic engagement, and regional pressures. From various perspectives, this study provides a multidimensional understanding of the policy by demonstrating how diplomatic initiatives, refugee management, border security, economic connectivity and a changing regional environment interacted during a critical period that shaped these events. Such as the Withdrawal of NATO forces, the Doha Agreement and the Taliban's return to power. The key feature of this government during its tenure was a relatively pragmatic, diplomatic orientation, although a weak institutional structure and economic limitations constrained this process. Another unique aspect of this research study is that it was conducted during a specific period between 2018 and 2022, when many events shaped a major shift in the region's geopolitics. The study draws on comprehensive sources and data, providing a robust analytical framework for understanding the constraints and opportunities that shaped Pakistan's foreign policy toward Afghanistan during this period. According to the study's findings, a sustainable policy toward Afghanistan will rely on stronger institutional coordination. This includes pragmatic security planning, consistent diplomatic engagement and greater regional cooperation while maintaining Pakistan's national interests.

### **Recommendations**

- Pakistan must avoid over-dependence on any single Afghan actor, including the Taliban. Future policy should focus on engaging various ethnic, political, and civil society stakeholders in Afghanistan to broaden diplomatic leverage and address barriers to regime stability (Khan, 2022).
- Pakistan should prioritize regional and international intelligence-sharing mechanisms to counter threats posed by groups like the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, Islamic State of Khorasan, and other non-state actors. Bilateral channels with Kabul should include non-negotiable security assurances, along with clear accountability measures (Rana, 2022).
- There is a pressing need to modernize Pakistan's Afghan refugee policy. This involves creating a national refugee framework that combines humanitarian values with security filters. Collaboration with UNHCR and donor states must be strengthened to ensure burden-sharing and support for host communities (UNHCR, 2022; Yusuf, 2021).
- Future governments should invest in coherent public diplomacy strategies that clearly articulate Pakistan's foreign policy goals to both domestic and global audiences. Such

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efforts must separate policy narratives from ideological or religious connotations to maintain neutrality and credibility (Rafiq, 2021).

- Sustained engagement through regional and global platforms, such as the OIC, SCO, and the United Nations, can help internationalize Afghanistan's humanitarian and security concerns. This approach enhances Pakistan's diplomatic influence and prevents regional isolation (MoFA, 2021).

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