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## **The Evolving US Posture and the Perpetual Crisis**

**The Afghanistan-Pakistan Conflict: What Does It Mean for Regional Stability and US Interests?**

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***Rapporteur's summary of May and November 2025 panel discussions***

### **Context**

In the aftermath of the withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan precipitated by the Doha Accords of 2020, a fundamentally new reality has emerged in South Asia. This era is defined by the uncompromising rule of the Taliban, which, other than Russia, still lacks global recognition; and the intensification of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border conflict.

Several questions thus come to the fore. Firstly, in the fast-changing geopolitical landscape, what US strategic interests are still at stake? This query is likely to gain more prominence considering the tragic shooting of two National Guard members near the White House on the eve of Thanksgiving in 2025. The shooter, Rahmanullah Lakanwal, had supported the US forces and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in Afghanistan, and immigrated under the Protect America Operation in 2021. The investigations of his motives are still underway.

The Middle East Institute (MEI) collaborated with PoliTact to [host a Webinar](#) on November 12, 2025, to explore these aspects centered around the evolving situation of Afghanistan and whether it merits a fresh policy and approach. Earlier in May, soon after the four-day conflict between Pakistan and India, MEI also conducted [a discussion with regional experts](#) to assess President Donald Trump's policy towards the Taliban. Both discussions were moderated by Dr. Marvin Weinbaum, the Director of MEI's Afghanistan-Pakistan Center.

The expert consensus, drawn from panel discussions, reveals that US engagement has shifted entirely from nation-building to a highly transactional and selective posture, forcing Washington and regional powers to confront a series of seemingly intractable security dilemmas. This analysis synthesizes the core findings of these discussions and address the critical questions surrounding regional stability. US ties with Pakistan and India and how the Great Power rivalry is playing out formed an integral part of this expert dialog.



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## **1. Transnationalism and Counter Terrorism**

One of the panelists, Joshua White, noted back in May and in the webinar held in November that the US strategic approach to the region presently is defined not by a cohesive doctrine, but by a combination of transactional interests and a deep political aversion to new "entanglements." David Sedney agreed with this assessment. This posture reflects a political desire for "quick interventions that can be framed as political wins," while strictly limiting long-term commitments. US strategic interests remain centered on counterterrorism (CT) and regional stability. There is a clear, mutual interest with the Taliban against their common enemy, Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP). However, immediate US involvement is almost exclusively contingent upon "transactional hooks," as White commented.

The other panelist, Doug London, noted in May that neither the White House nor the Taliban regime in Kabul, or Kandahar, where the supreme leader is based, want an al-Qaeda attack whose "fingerprints are all over Afghanistan." This shared CT necessity allows for some degree of intelligence cooperation.

On the other hand, in May Javid Ahmad identified hostage diplomacy and efforts to recover military equipment left behind as core drivers of US engagement. This transactional nature was evident in securing the release of Americans, sometimes in exchange for concessions, such as the removal of bounties on Haqqani Network leaders. Ahmad also highlighted that recovering equipment — which includes not just weapons but billions of dollars in infrastructure and basing systems — presents a difficult policy choice for the US: destroy it, overpay to buy it back via middlemen like Pakistan, or engage directly with the Taliban.

Sedney and Ahmad agreed that while the US is the most visible partner, Pakistan's deepest strategic alignment remains with China. The US engagement serves as a valuable counter-lever for Islamabad to use in its wider geopolitical game. The much-discussed reset in US-Pakistan relations, often framed around trade, strategic minerals, and economic support, is unlikely to override the dominance of transactional security realities.

## **2. Human rights and Counter Terrorism Cooperation**

Lisa Curtis noted in May that one of the fundamental dilemmas for the US is its inability to influence the Taliban's repressive policies regarding women's and human rights. She drew a sharp contrast between the Taliban and other regimes that have sought legitimacy, arguing that the Taliban has shown "no change in policies" toward its people, women, and civil society, with its actions being "as bad as what we saw in the 1990s."

She argued against sacrificing principles for transactional CT gains, emphasizing that a more nuanced policy must marry CT interests with human rights advocacy. Furthermore, the treatment of women is not purely a moral issue; the repression fuels extremism by driving up the number of ungoverned spaces and potentially feeding into the environment where militancy thrives.



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Commenting on her position, London suggested that the US does not technically need to make concessions on human rights to secure this intel and CT cooperation, as the US government often operates under waivers with partners who commit human rights abuses when it is in the US national interest.

### **Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the TTP**

Since the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan in August 2021, there has been the perception that the installation of the Afghan Taliban in Kabul would make Pakistan's regional influence grow. However, the Afghan Taliban-Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) nexus continues to bedevil the relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The [TTP](#) remains the central source of friction and a key driver of the persistent cross-border violence. Since the four-day war between India and Pakistan in May 2025, the Taliban-Pakistan fighting seems to be escalating.

The conflict is considered the most immediate regional threat, a complex struggle that David Sedney observed is merely a subplot to the India-Pakistan rivalry, with the recent tensions being viewed as a signal from Islamabad to Delhi. However, the panel was unanimous that a full-scale conventional war between Pakistan and the Taliban is unlikely, if not impossible. This conclusion is based on the overwhelming risks for both parties.

Sedney detailed Pakistan's massive military asymmetry, including its arsenal of small tactical nuclear weapons. The Taliban, operating on a "generational, millennial" timetable, will not risk regime destruction in a conventional clash. Conversely, Craig Karp noted that any Pakistani ground incursion would inevitably lead to a bloody and unmanageable guerrilla war, a conflict the Pakistani military is not equipped to fight.

According to Joshua White, the conflict exists as a "sustained spiral" of violence or a "shadow war" where Pakistan leverages its air superiority to conduct "very precise, very targeted" kinetic strikes. The Taliban retaliates via the TTP.

The TTP is the source of cross-border attacks, but the Afghan Taliban staunchly refuses to act against them, insisting that the TTP is Pakistan's "internal problem" that Islamabad must solve. This ideological brotherhood and refusal to compromise on sovereignty ensure the conflict continues. Ahmad warned that the Taliban's use of a "martyrdom battalion" and the TTP's capability for urban suicide attacks makes the retaliation threat unmanageable for Pakistan's internal security.

Regardless, the broader question that emerges is what the Afghan Taliban aims to achieve from this indifference towards the TTP. The answer to this lies in the key demands of the TTP: rescinding of the merger of previously Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), withdrawal of Pakistan's military from the Tribal Areas, and implementation of Sharia in these areas. This will likely give the Afghan Taliban the ideological space and influence over Pakistan.



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David Sedney remarked that in the aftermath of the US withdrawal, the TTP and the Afghan Taliban believe that historically, power is shifting in their favor. While not imminent, they think Pakistan — and possibly India — could come under Taliban-like rule within 20 years. This is viewed as a long-term strategic goal.

### **US Leverage and Pakistan's Regime Change Gambit**

The panel in May also explored the potential for US to leverage internal splits within the Taliban. London noted that the pragmatic, business-minded Haqqani faction sees an opportunity in transactional engagement with the US. The fundamentalist, isolationist core around Supreme Leader Hibatullah Akhundzada, by contrast, prefers a "hermit kingdom" and fears dependency on the US. While this split exists, the consensus is that Akhundzada still holds the ultimate authority, and neither faction will risk displaying so much "daylight" between them that it invites civil war.

On the other hand, Pakistan's frustration with the Taliban is real, driving a potential shift in strategy, but creating a compliant regime is viewed as highly improbable. In the webinar, Javid Ahmad warned that Pakistan fully backing the disunited Afghan resistance groups would be an extremely risky strategy, requiring huge financial and kinetic commitments. Furthermore, the current Afghan resistance lacks the "agency, unity of front, or staying power" to mount a credible threat to the Taliban.

White dismissed the idea of Pakistan creating a compliant regime, citing the historical difficulty of installing a "mythical Pashtun" pro-Pakistan leadership in Kabul. Instead, Pakistan is likely to focus on exploiting internal rifts within the Taliban leadership to find a more sympathetic faction or simply looking for alternatives if the Taliban continues to be a liability, as Ahmad suggested. The current tensions have already led to a shift in the Pakistani military's view from the "good Taliban versus bad Taliban" framework to "bad Taliban and worse Taliban," indicating a growing pragmatic willingness to abandon its former ally.

At an event held at the [United States Institute of Peace](#) (USIP) on February 15, 2022, the Special Representative for Afghanistan at the time, Tom West, had discussed the economic leverage the [US still holds](#) and commented that the Afghan Taliban has shown little interest in future cooperation with the US in fulfilling the terms of their side of the Doha Accord. At the same time, West noted that the US is not supporting any opposition to the Afghan Taliban and is advising other nations to refrain from doing so, but some will do it sooner or later if the Taliban does not show urgency. Answering a question, he commented that many players are realizing that not having US engagement in Afghanistan is not in their interest.

### **Regional Stability and Geopolitical Calculus**

The webinar also examined the prospect of a wider war between Pakistan and Afghanistan, which is unlikely to have major destabilizing effects beyond the immediate border region. White



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noted that while the death and destruction caused by the TTP within Pakistan would be devastating, the crisis does not necessarily pose a global security threat. No major regional or global stakeholder stands to gain from a total collapse of the Afghan state. Total chaos would lead to massive refugee flows, a spike in ungoverned space for global terror groups, and regional instability that threatens critical infrastructure.

In the May event, Lisa Curtis stated India has made a "major change" in policy by courting the Taliban and is playing a long game to undermine Pakistan's influence and drive a wedge between the Taliban and Islamabad. In its four-day conflict with Pakistan, India also demonstrated a new resolve to incrementally increase the cost of terrorism by striking deep inside Pakistan's heartland, a significant shift in the region's rules of engagement.

On the other hand, China and Russia are approaching the crisis with calculated caution, primarily focused on mitigating risks to their immediate security and economic interests. Sedney commented, as Pakistan's most important relationship, China's chief concern is the threat of cross-border violence impacting its enormous China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) investments. He added that recently President Trump met with the all the heads of the Central Asian countries, the so-called C5 plus one. The centerpiece of the meeting, according to the press, was strategic minerals. Certainly, "Russia and China will have seen this as trespassing on their turf that they've spent a lot of effort to try and build up their influence over."

White noted, echoing the panel's general perspective, that viewing Pakistan and Afghanistan solely through a geopolitical lens is limiting. The rising violence in Pakistan should concern China, which has significant interests and investments there, making China a stakeholder in the country's stability and progress. Meanwhile, Karp said the Chinese economic interests and relations with both countries are greater than pretty much anybody else's. The nation initially tried to bridge this dispute and failed. On the other hand, Russia has a deeper relationship with the Taliban than is publicly known. Russia's core security interest is the CT threat spilling over into Central Asia, leading it to publicly cooperate with the Taliban on countering ISKP.

The Taliban benefits from this Great Power competition. Javid Ahmad noted that the Taliban, especially those that are business oriented, have a more positive view towards Russia and China, as they see investment potential. However, the hardliners in Kandahar are suspicious of engagement with them likely because they do not understand what their intentions are in Afghanistan.

Ahmad described the Taliban as seeking "economic neutrality" to extract value and political security from all sides, effectively using the rivalry to assert their sovereignty. This view also aligns with the PoliFact's assessment in August:

"As the Afghan Taliban celebrate their 4<sup>th</sup> year in power, the nation now finds itself at a crossroads of competing currents. The net effect is a cautious, multi-prong stance: keep Iranian channels open for trade and energy, nurture Indian economic alternatives through Chabahar,



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avoid burning bridges with Pakistan as it courts Washington, and remain pragmatically receptive to Chinese infrastructure where it serves Afghan interests.”

### **The Way Forward: Managing the Unsolvable Conflict**

The fundamental takeaway from the MEI discussions, as reiterated by Dr. Weinbaum, is that the path forward, barring any major event, offers "no military solution" and no clear diplomatic solution to the Afghanistan-Pakistan conflict. The best and most realistic hope is for a long-term commitment to "manage the conflict" — and US may play a role in that — and “so might the neighbors because they're in a unique position to be able to create incentives for both Pakistan and Afghanistan to bring about regional cooperation which would benefit both countries.”

The Afghanistan-Pakistan conflict is not currently viewed as a "macro geopolitical competitive threat," but the actions and concerns of surrounding Great Powers are critical to its containment. Ahmad stressed that the US must abandon "chasing unicorns" and approach the issue with pragmatism, built around a clear value proposition focused on leverage and outcomes rather than fixed ideals. This means engaging both the Taliban and non-Taliban pragmatic actors who hold real convening power, even if the process is "distasteful." Moreover, Ahmad emphasized that the US would have to get involved sooner rather than later but it should not overreact and stay neutral.

The US and regional powers are in a unique position to create incentives for cooperation by focusing on border management and providing aid conditioned on minimal security assurances. China, Turkey, and Qatar could contribute by using their economic leverage to force the Taliban to rein in the TTP and focus on internal stability. The goal is to avoid total state collapse — a scenario that London emphasized would be disastrous for everyone, leading to refugees and ungoverned space — while simultaneously refusing to legitimize the regime. Karp, however, pointed out that ironically both Turkey and Qatar are also staunch supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood.

In summation, US policy has become a delicate, transactional dance performed on the periphery of an unstable region. It is a calculated retreat that seeks to manage the consequences of the 2021 withdrawal, accepting that the core ideological and security challenges of the region are beyond its current strategic capacity to solve. The future of South Asia is thus one of perpetual crisis management, where the line between calculated engagement and unwanted entanglement remains razor thin.

As London noted in May, neither the White House nor the Taliban regime in Kabul or Kandahar want an al-Qaeda attack the traces back to Afghanistan. However, the challenge is if at some point Afghanistan once again starts resembling the ecosystem that existed prior to 9/11, from where an attack on the US and its allies could originate, what policy options would the US have? Under the Trump administration, the likelihood is more CT cooperation with Pakistan and India — to proactively avert such an outcome.



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Nevertheless, as India strengthens ties with the Afghan Taliban, it is likely to reinforce the Taliban behavior of destabilizing Pakistan through the TTP and Balouch insurgents — and meanwhile jettison the reset between the US and Pakistan relations. This could potentially resuscitate the ideological monster against which the war on extremism was fought.

Furthermore, the space and influence the Afghan Taliban want to create with the TTP could have far-reaching consequences for the Gaza peace process envisioned by President Trump. To avert such an outcome, Trump's Taliban policy would require broader public ownership of Pakistan's CT strategy and preventing the budding India-Afghan relationship from destabilizing Pakistan and the rejuvenated US-Pakistan ties.