



## Pakistan as a Key Player in the Global War on Terror (2001–2021)

Nasr Ullah <sup>1\*</sup>, Momna Khan <sup>2</sup>, Bilal Khan <sup>3</sup>, Irfan Ullah <sup>4</sup>, Sajjad Khan <sup>5</sup>, Khubaib Ali <sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Political Science, Abdul Wali Khan University, Pakistan

<sup>2</sup> Department of Defense and Strategic Studies, Quaid-i-Azam University, Pakistan

<sup>3</sup> Department of International Relations, Abdul Wali Khan University, Pakistan

<sup>4,6</sup> Department of Political Science, Abdul Wali Khan University, Pakistan

\* Corresponding Author: **Nasr Ullah**

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### Abstract

This paper examines Pakistan's role as a central actor in the Global War on Terror (GWOT) from 2001 to 2021. Following the 9/11 attacks, Pakistan aligned with the United States, providing logistics, intelligence, and military support, which positioned it as a frontline ally but also exposed it to unprecedented domestic security threats. The study analyzes Pakistan's strategic contributions, including military operations in tribal areas, cooperation with U.S. intelligence, and facilitation of the U.S.–Taliban peace process, alongside the immense costs of terrorism, over 70,000 lives lost and economic damages exceeding \$120 billion. Internationally, Pakistan's relations with the U.S., Afghanistan, China, and other powers oscillated between cooperation and mistrust, reflecting its complex balancing act. While Pakistan dismantled significant militant networks and enhanced its counterterrorism capacity, allegations of duplicity and persistent cross-border militancy undermined its credibility. The findings suggest that Pakistan's role in GWOT was marked by both achievement and controversy, yielding short-term strategic and financial gains but long-term instability and reputational challenges.

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### 1. Introduction

The attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001 fundamentally reshaped the international security order and ushered in an era defined by the Global War on Terror (GWOT). The U.S. and its allies declared an unprecedented campaign to dismantle terrorist networks, eliminate sanctuaries, and prevent the recurrence of large-scale transnational terrorism. At the heart of this global campaign stood Pakistan, a country whose geography, history, and political ties with Afghanistan made it indispensable to both the United States and the international community (Abbas, H. 2014) <sup>[2]</sup>.

Sharing a 2,600-kilometer porous border with Afghanistan, Pakistan became the primary gateway for U.S.-led military operations. The country's strategic location, coupled with its long-standing involvement in Afghan affairs during the Soviet-Afghan War and its support of the Taliban in the 1990s, meant that its cooperation could either make or break the U.S.-led counterterrorism agenda. When General Pervez Musharraf's government decided to align with Washington in 2001, Pakistan transitioned from being a state under international sanctions for its nuclear program and military rule to becoming a frontline

ally in the global fight against terrorism (Barfield, T. 2010) [6]. Pakistan's role in GWOT was, however, multifaceted and deeply complex. On one hand, the country provided critical support to the U.S. and NATO forces by allowing the use of its airspace and military bases, facilitating supply routes, and capturing key Al-Qaeda leaders. Pakistani security forces conducted large-scale counterinsurgency operations in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and launched targeted campaigns against militant groups such as the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). On the other hand, Pakistan's role has been marred by controversy, with accusations of pursuing a "double game"—cooperating with the United States while allegedly providing sanctuary to the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani Network for strategic leverage in Afghanistan (Rashid, A. 2008) [30].

The consequences of Pakistan's involvement were severe and multidimensional. Domestically, the country suffered immense losses, with over 70,000 civilians and security personnel killed in terrorist attacks, according to official estimates, and economic losses exceeding \$150 billion. Terrorism destabilized the country's internal security, created millions of internally displaced persons (IDPs), and generated deep social and political polarization. The rise of violent groups such as the TTP, sectarian outfits, and other extremist factions posed existential threats to the state. Politically, the alliance with the United States generated strong domestic opposition, straining civil-military relations and fueling an anti-American narrative. Internationally, Pakistan faced a paradox: while recognized as a "major non-NATO ally," it was also consistently accused by Washington of failing to eliminate militant sanctuaries, leading to recurrent cycles of cooperation, mistrust, and strategic recalibration (Nawaz, S. 2016) [28].

The rationale for studying Pakistan's role in GWOT lies in its unique position as both a victim and a participant in global counterterrorism. Unlike most U.S. allies, Pakistan bore the brunt of terrorism within its own borders, turning its towns, cities, and tribal areas into battlefields. At the same time, Pakistan's cooperation was indispensable in dismantling Al-Qaeda's leadership, conducting intelligence operations, and facilitating negotiations such as the Doha Peace Talks between the U.S. and the Taliban. Examining Pakistan's role thus provides crucial insights into the broader dilemmas of counterterrorism, the unintended consequences of alliances, and the geopolitics of South Asia.

#### **This research is guided by three central questions:**

1. What role did Pakistan play in the Global War on Terror between 2001 and 2021?
2. How did Pakistan balance its domestic security concerns with international pressures from the United States and its allies?
3. What were the political, social, and economic consequences of Pakistan's involvement in this twenty-year conflict?

#### **To address these questions, the study sets the following objectives:**

- To analyze Pakistan's military, intelligence, and diplomatic cooperation in the Global War on Terror.
- To examine the domestic challenges and internal repercussions of its role, including the rise of militancy

and socio-economic instability.

- To evaluate the overall outcomes of Pakistan's involvement in GWOT in terms of achievements, failures, and long-term implications for national security and foreign policy.

#### **1.1. Methodology**

This research is based on a qualitative approach, relying entirely on secondary sources of data to examine Pakistan's role in the Global War on Terror (2001–2021). Instead of generating new primary data, the study uses existing literature, reports, and official documents to build a comprehensive analysis.

The main sources of data include academic books and peer-reviewed journal articles that discuss terrorism, counterterrorism, South Asian politics, and Pakistan's foreign policy. To provide official perspectives, the study uses government documents, such as reports from Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Interior, and annual economic surveys, as well as U.S. Congressional Research Service (CRS) reports, State Department terrorism reports, and documents from the United Nations and Financial Action Task Force (FATF).

In addition, research and policy reports from leading think tanks such as the Brookings Institution, Carnegie Endowment, RAND Corporation, International Crisis Group (ICG), and Pakistan-based institutes like the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) and the Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies (PIPS) are also used. For statistical and economic data, the study draws on the World Bank, IMF, Asian Development Bank (ADB), Pakistan Economic Surveys, and the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) to measure the costs and trends of terrorism.

Finally, the research incorporates information from credible newspapers and media outlets such as Dawn, The News International, Express Tribune, BBC, New York Times, Washington Post, and Al Jazeera to trace the timeline of events and capture contemporary perspectives. Speeches and statements of Pakistani and U.S. leaders are also included to understand official positions.

By combining these diverse sources, the research ensures a balanced and cross-verified analysis, drawing on both domestic and international perspectives to evaluate Pakistan's role in the Global War on Terror.

## **2. Historical Background**

### **Pre-9/11 Security Context**

To understand Pakistan's central role in the Global War on Terror (GWOT), it is essential to first examine its security and political engagements prior to the September 11, 2001 attacks. Pakistan's involvement in Afghanistan goes back to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979. As the closest neighbor with cultural, religious, and ethnic ties to Afghanistan, Pakistan became the frontline state in the U.S.-sponsored Afghan Jihad (1979–1989).

Under General Zia-ul-Haq's military regime (1977–1988), Pakistan, in cooperation with the United States and Saudi Arabia, facilitated the training, arming, and financing of Afghan mujahideen to fight Soviet forces. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) worked together to channel resources. According to declassified U.S. records, Washington spent

nearly \$3 billion in covert assistance during this period, while Saudi Arabia matched the U.S. dollar-for-dollar, making it one of the largest covert operations of the Cold War. Pakistan's tribal areas, particularly in Khyber Agency, Bajaur, and North Waziristan, became major staging grounds for guerrilla warfare (Rizvi, H. A. 2003) <sup>[32]</sup>.

By the time the Soviet Union withdrew in February 1989, Pakistan had not only strengthened its influence in Afghanistan but also established close ties with various Islamist groups. This involvement shaped Pakistan's strategic calculus for years to come. The Afghan war, however, had unintended consequences: it militarized Pakistani society, facilitated the rise of jihadist groups, and created a refugee crisis with over 3 million Afghans settling in Pakistan, mostly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (then NWFP) and Balochistan.

Following the Soviet withdrawal, Afghanistan descended into civil war. In this chaotic environment, the Taliban movement emerged in 1994, led by Mullah Mohammad Omar and drawing heavily from Afghan refugee camps and religious seminaries (madrassas) in Pakistan. The Taliban quickly gained control of large parts of Afghanistan and eventually captured Kabul in September 1996. Pakistan became one of only three countries (alongside Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates) to formally recognize the Taliban regime (Shah, A. 2014) <sup>[34]</sup>.

Pakistan's support for the Taliban was rooted in its doctrine of "strategic depth", which aimed to secure a friendly government in Kabul to counterbalance India and provide military fallback space in case of conflict. The Taliban provided Pakistan with influence but also brought new challenges: the rise of Al-Qaeda, which used Afghan territory as a safe haven, and the growing association of Pakistan with extremist networks (Jones, S. G. 2010) <sup>[21]</sup>.

By the late 1990s, Pakistan faced increasing international isolation. The 1998 nuclear tests and the 1999 military coup by General Pervez Musharraf placed Pakistan under U.S. and Western sanctions. Yet, despite this isolation, Pakistan maintained its ties with the Taliban, hosting Taliban leaders and allowing cross-border movement. This pre-9/11 environment set the stage for the dramatic shift in Pakistan's policies after the September 2001 attacks.

### 9/11 and Immediate Aftermath

On September 11, 2001, Al-Qaeda operatives hijacked four U.S. commercial airliners, crashing them into the World Trade Center towers in New York, the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., and a field in Pennsylvania. The attacks killed 2,977 people and injured over 6,000, making it the deadliest terrorist attack in history. The perpetrators were sheltered by Al-Qaeda's leader, Osama bin Laden, who was residing in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan (U.S. Department of Defense. 2002) <sup>[38]</sup>.

In the immediate aftermath, U.S. President George W. Bush declared a "Global War on Terror" and demanded worldwide support. On 12 September 2001, the U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage summoned Pakistan's ISI Chief, Lt. Gen. Mahmood Ahmed, and delivered a list of seven demands to the Pakistani government. These demands included:

1. Ending logistical support for the Taliban.
2. Providing the U.S. with airspace and intelligence cooperation.

3. Denying sanctuary to terrorists.
4. Sharing intelligence on extremist groups.
5. Breaking diplomatic ties with the Taliban if they refused to hand over Osama bin Laden.
6. Allowing U.S. forces access to Pakistani bases.
7. Assuring Pakistan's public cooperation in the War on Terror.

According to Musharraf's memoir *In the Line of Fire* (2006), the choice was stark: the U.S. made it clear that Pakistan had to decide whether it was "with us or against us." Facing the threat of being diplomatically and militarily isolated, General Pervez Musharraf announced Pakistan's full cooperation on 19 September 2001.

Pakistan's cooperation took several forms:

**Airspace and Bases:** Pakistan granted the U.S. and NATO access to its airbases, such as Jacobabad and Pasni, and allowed over flight rights for military operations in Afghanistan.

**Intelligence Sharing:** The ISI provided critical intelligence, which helped in the arrest of several Al-Qaeda leaders. For example, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the mastermind of 9/11, was captured in Rawalpindi in March 2003 with CIA-ISI collaboration.

**Military Operations:** From 2002 onward, Pakistan deployed over 70,000 troops in the tribal areas the largest deployment in the region's history at the time to hunt down Al-Qaeda and Taliban militants.

**Diplomatic Break with Taliban:** Pakistan officially severed ties with the Taliban regime, though unofficial networks persisted.

The decision to ally with the U.S. marked a turning point in Pakistan's history. On one hand, it lifted sanctions and brought billions in aid; between 2001 and 2009, Pakistan received approximately \$12 billion in U.S. military and economic assistance, including Coalition Support Funds (CSF). On the other hand, it unleashed domestic backlash, with Islamist parties condemning the alliance and militant groups targeting Pakistan as a collaborator of the West.

Thus, the post-9/11 decision to join GWOT positioned Pakistan as a frontline state, but it also triggered the dual challenges of managing international obligations and battling the violent blowback within its own borders (Nawaz, S. 2008) <sup>[27]</sup>.

## 3. Pakistan's Strategic Role in the Global War on Terror (GWOT), 2001–2021

### 3.1. Military Contributions

#### Use of Pakistani Air Bases and Logistics Routes

After 9/11, Pakistan granted the United States and NATO limited use of its airfields and over flight rights. Bases such as Shahbaz and Shamsi (Balochistan) were made available, primarily for logistics, aircraft recovery, and supply routes. Pakistan also permitted coalition aircraft to use specific flight corridors, which proved vital for sustaining NATO/ISAF operations in Afghanistan in the early years. Although access was restricted, Pakistan's cooperation eased logistical bottlenecks and facilitated the rapid deployment of troops and supplies into Afghanistan.

### Deployment of Pakistani Troops in FATA and Tribal Regions

From 2002 onward, Pakistan deployed tens of thousands of troops to the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) to dismantle Al-Qaeda and Taliban sanctuaries. This was unprecedented, as these semi-autonomous tribal regions had rarely witnessed such large-scale state military presence. By the late 2000s, Pakistan had launched multiple full-scale operations with corps-sized forces, supported by paramilitary units and intelligence-led special forces. These operations were critical to regaining state control in militant strongholds such as South and North Waziristan (Yusuf, M. 2014) [43].

### Major Counter-Terror Operations

**Operation Rah-e-Nijat (2009):** Launched on 19 June 2009 in South Waziristan, involving around 28,000–45,000 troops. The operation aimed to dismantle Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) sanctuaries. Official reports claim over 800 militants killed and around 83 Pakistani soldiers lost. Civilian displacement was massive, with nearly 1–2 million people forced to leave their homes.

**Operation Zarb-e-Azb (2014):** Initiated on 15 June 2014 in North Waziristan after the Karachi airport attack. Roughly 30,000 troops took part in a comprehensive ground and air campaign. Official estimates suggest about 2,700–3,500 militants were killed, alongside hundreds of Pakistani military casualties. Nearly one million civilians were displaced during the fighting.

**Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad (2017):** Launched nationwide on 22 February 2017 to consolidate earlier gains. Unlike previous operations, it was not confined to one region but targeted militant networks across the country. In 2017 alone, official figures reported around 591 militants killed, 215 soldiers martyred, and 463 civilians killed. These operations not only degraded militant infrastructure but also caused large-scale humanitarian crises, particularly in the form of internal displacement.

### 3.2. Intelligence and Counterterrorism Cooperation

Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) worked closely with the CIA, despite a relationship marked by both cooperation and mistrust.

**Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (2003):** Captured in Rawalpindi on 1 March 2003 in a joint operation. He was considered the mastermind of the 9/11 attacks. This arrest highlighted Pakistan's crucial intelligence-sharing role.

**Osama bin Laden (2011):** Killed in Abbottabad on 2 May 2011 in a U.S. Navy SEAL operation. The incident created immense controversy: the U.S. claimed it acted unilaterally without informing Pakistan, while Pakistan faced global embarrassment over bin Laden's presence in its territory. Overall, intelligence cooperation resulted in major successes but also fueled tensions, with the U.S. accusing Pakistan of selective action while Pakistan emphasized its own security priorities.

**Table 1:** Summary Table of Major Operations

Operation	Start Date	Primary Area	Troops Involved	Militants Killed (official)	Forces Killed (official)	IDPs (approx.)
Rah-e-Nijat	19 Jun 2009	South Waziristan	28,000–45,000	800+	83	1–2 million
Zarb-e-Azb	15 Jun 2014	North Waziristan	~30,000	2,700–3,500	~490	~1 million
Radd-ul-Fasaad	22 Feb 2017	Nationwide	Nationwide mobilization	591 (2017)	215 (2017)	N/A

### 3.3. Diplomatic Role

Pakistan's diplomacy during GWOT was a balancing act. On one hand, it acted as a frontline ally of the U.S., and on the other, it sought to preserve influence in Afghanistan through its ties with Taliban factions.

Pakistan facilitated dialogue between the Taliban and international actors. Its role was especially critical in the Doha peace talks (2018–2020), which led to the signing of the U.S.–Taliban Agreement on 29 February 2020. Pakistan provided safe passage and political support for these negotiations, asserting itself as a mediator.

Critics argued Pakistan pursued a "dual policy," while Islamabad justified its actions as protecting its national security interests and seeking stability in Afghanistan.

### 3.4. Economic and Financial Problems

A key aspect of Pakistan's role in GWOT was financial compliance under global counterterrorism frameworks. In 2018, Pakistan was placed on the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) grey list due to deficiencies in combating money laundering and terror financing.

Facing mounting international pressure, Pakistan implemented an action plan to regulate its financial institutions, prosecute cases of terror financing, and monitor cross-border transactions.

By 2020, FATF acknowledged Pakistan's progress, though

the grey-listing had already affected its economy by restricting access to global financial markets and discouraging foreign investment.

### 4. Domestic Challenges and Repercussions

#### 4.1. Security fallout

The post-9/11 period saw a dramatic rise of insurgent groups and a steady increase in violent attacks inside Pakistan. The security environment deteriorated especially after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan (2001), the Taliban resurgence in border regions, and Pakistan's own military campaigns that displaced militant networks into new areas (Zahab, M. A. 2002) [45].

#### Rise of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)

**Formation and leadership:** The TTP (Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan) was formally created in December 2007 as an umbrella of several militant factions; Baitullah Mehsud emerged as an early leader (killed in a U.S. drone strike in August 2009). The TTP quickly positioned itself as the main insurgent force attacking Pakistani state targets, security forces and civilians.

**Tactics and targets:** The TTP adopted suicide bombings, complex assaults, targeted assassinations and improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Its stated goal was to overthrow the

Pakistani state and impose its version of Islamic law; it also targeted schools, polio teams, minority communities and security checkpoints.

**Growth and fragmentation:** After 2010 the TTP fragmented into regional sub-groups and affiliated networks; leadership decapitations, internal disputes and the pressure of Pakistani military operations reduced its centralized command but did not eliminate its capacity to conduct high-casualty attacks.

#### Typical major attacks

**Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) siege, July 2007:** A high-profile confrontation in Islamabad between Islamist students/clerics and state forces that presaged a new cycle of militancy and state response.

**Assassination of Benazir Bhutto, 27 December 2007:** A pivotal political assassination that triggered nationwide

unrest and raised questions about political stability and militant networks.

**Marriott Hotel bombing, Islamabad, 20 September 2008:** A large suicide attack that killed dozens and signaled the spread of high-profile urban terrorism.

**Army Public School (APS) attack, Peshawar, 16 December 2014:** One of the deadliest single attacks in Pakistan's history — attackers stormed the school and murdered pupils and staff. Official tallies and widely reported counts put the death toll at 149 people including 132 students (the vast majority children) and many injured. This attack provoked national outrage and prompted a major policy response (including the National Action Plan).

**Salala (NATO) airstrike fallout, 26 November 2011:** Although not an insurgent attack, the NATO airstrike that killed 24 Pakistani soldiers at Salala created a severe rupture with the U.S. and inflamed public sentiment.

**Table 2:** Security happenings and casualties

Incident	Date	Nature	Reported casualties (approx.)	Significance
Lal Masjid	July 2007	Mosque/madrassa clash with state forces	Hundreds (combined casualties and arrests)	Marked escalation between militants and state
Benazir Bhutto assassination	27 Dec 2007	Political assassination	Dozens killed/wounded	Political destabilization
Marriott Hotel bombing (Islamabad)	20 Sep 2008	Suicide bombing	~50+ killed	Urban terrorism; international symbolism
Khalid Sheikh Mohammed capture	1 Mar 2003	Counterterror capture	N/A (military/counterterror event)	Major intelligence success
Army Public School (APS), Peshawar	16 Dec 2014	School siege by militants	149 killed (including ~132 students)	National trauma; led to National Action Plan
Salala NATO strike	26 Nov 2011	NATO airstrike on Pakistani check post	24 Pakistani soldiers killed	Diplomatic rupture with U.S.

**Notes:** casualty figures are drawn from official counts and widely reported media

#### 4.2. Socio-economic impacts

The security crisis and repeated terrorist attacks produced heavy human and economic costs: lives lost, large numbers of injured, wide scale displacement, damage to infrastructure, and macroeconomic consequences (investment decline, tourism collapse, higher security spending).

Human and military casualties

**Cumulative deaths:** Over the two decades there were tens of thousands of fatalities attributable to terrorism and counterterror operations. Commonly cited consolidated figures for the period 2001–2018 place total deaths (civilians + security forces + militants) in the tens of thousands; many reports and Pakistani government records put combined civilian and security deaths in the 50,000–70,000+ range, while some independent counts that include militant fatalities push the aggregate higher.

**Wounded and long-term trauma:** Besides fatalities, many

thousands were injured, producing long-term disability and psychosocial trauma, especially among children and survivors of attacks.

#### Economic costs

**Direct and indirect losses:** Estimates of Pakistan's macroeconomic loss due to terrorism and instability vary by source. Conservative aggregated estimates often cite hundreds of billions of dollars in lost output, reduced foreign investment, infrastructure damage and higher security expenditure across two decades. Many analysts estimate the cumulative economic cost since 2001 to lie in the range of \$100–150 billion (or more) when accounting for lost GDP growth, reconstruction, and security spending.

**Sectorial impacts:** Sectors such as tourism, retail, trade, and foreign direct investment were particularly affected. Increased security spending, diverted public resources from development and social services.

**Table 3:** Human and economic impact (summary)

Indicator	Approximate magnitude / notes
Civilians & security forces killed (2001–2020)	Tens of thousands (commonly cited ranges: 50,000–70,000+; counts vary by source)
Wounded / injured	Many thousands (official and NGO reports)
Cumulative estimated economic cost (2001–2016/2020)	USD 100–150+ billion (approx.)
Rise in security spending	Marked increase in defense and internal security budgets across 2000s–2010s
Impact on investment & tourism	Sharp declines after major attacks; slow recovery linked to security improvements post-2015

### 4.3. Political challenges

Pakistan's engagement in GWOT produced deep political reverberations domestically: rising polarization, debate over policy choices, and recurrent tensions between civilian governments and the military establishment.

#### Strains on civil–military relations

**Power dynamics:** The military's leading role in counterinsurgency, intelligence operations and control over security policy increased its practical influence over national decision-making. Civilian governments often deferred to military leadership on security, intelligence and foreign policy matters, which at times produced friction between elected officials and military leadership.

**Major flashpoints:** Events like the Salala incident (26 November 2011) and the unilateral U.S. Abbottabad raid (2 May 2011) strained civilian oversight and generated public

demands for stronger accountability and transparency from both the political leadership and military. Political fallout included parliamentary debates, public protests and a temporary closure of NATO supply lines into Afghanistan by Pakistan in 2011.

#### Domestic opposition, to alliance with the U.S.

**Public opinion and political parties:** Pakistan's alliance with the U.S. in GWOT was unpopular among large segments of the population. Islamist parties, nationalist groups and sections of civil society criticized cooperation with the U.S., framing it as compromising sovereignty and contributing to domestic insecurity.

**Electoral and political consequences:** Anti-U.S. sentiment was a factor in political mobilization; successive governments had to manage both international obligations and domestic political costs.

**Table 4:** Key political flashpoints and consequences

Incident	Date(s)	Political effect
Abbottabad raid (Osama bin Laden)	2 May 2011	Public outrage; questions about state sovereignty and intelligence lapses
Salala NATO strike	26 Nov 2011	Pakistan closed NATO supply lines for months; diplomatic rupture with U.S.; apology and restoration in July 2012
Political opposition to U.S. policy	2001–2015 (ongoing)	Islamist and nationalist parties protested U.S. alliance; increased domestic polarization
Military's expanded domestic role	2000s–2010s	Greater military influence on security and foreign policy; recurring civil–military tensions

### 4.4. Humanitarian issues

Large military operations, prolonged violence and refugee flows produced significant humanitarian challenges: mass internal displacement, return and reintegration problems, and the long-term burden of hosting Afghan refugees.

**Internal displacement due to military operations**

Major military offensives displaced hundreds of thousands to over a million people at different times. For example: Operation Rah-e-Nijat (2009) created a large displacement wave in South Waziristan, estimates of displaced persons during that operation ranged up to ~1–2 million at peak evacuation periods (including those who fled and later returned in phases).

Operation Zarb-e-Azb (2014) displaced roughly 0.9–1.0 million civilians from North Waziristan; many later returned under government-facilitated rehabilitation programs, though recovery and reconstruction remained uneven.

**IDP response:** Pakistan ran emergency relief camps, and international agencies (UNHCR, IOM, NGOs) supported

humanitarian assistance. Return and rehabilitation programs were implemented but long-term livelihoods, housing and psychosocial recovery remained major challenges.

#### Refugee crises and cross-border instability

**Afghan refugees in Pakistan:** Since the Soviet era Pakistan hosted millions of Afghan refugees. At the outbreak of the GWOT and following successive Afghan conflicts, Pakistan continued to host large refugee populations. At various points more than 3 million Afghan refugees lived in Pakistan (peak after the Soviet war). By the 2010s registered refugee numbers fell due to returns and repatriation programs, but large populations (unregistered and undocumented) continued to place pressure on public services and local economies in host areas.

**Cross-border instability:** Porous borders and cross-border movement of militants complicated both security operations and humanitarian responses; return flows sometimes brought security concerns and reintegration challenges.

**Table 5:** Displacement and refugee summary

Issue	Approximate magnitude / notes
IDPs from 2008–2016 major operations	Hundreds of thousands to ~2 million at peaks during different operations (Rah-e-Nijat, Zarb-e-Azb)
Afghan refugees hosted in Pakistan (historical peak)	Over 3 million (peak during/after 1980s Soviet war); registered refugees in 2010s ~1–2 million (numbers vary)
Humanitarian response	National relief efforts + UN and NGO support; gradual return and reconstruction programs with uneven outcomes

### International Dimensions of Pakistan's Role (2001–2021) Relations with the United States

#### Strategic partnership and aid dependence (Coalition Support Funds)

After 9/11 Pakistan rapidly became one of Washington's

most important regional partners. The relationship combined military cooperation, intelligence sharing, logistical access for operations into Afghanistan, and large-scale economic and security assistance (U.S. Department of State. 2010). Two features stand out:

Coalition Support Funds (CSF) and security/economic aid: In the 2000s the U.S. reimbursed Pakistan through CSF for logistical support and incurred costs. Across the first decade after 2001 Pakistan received several billions of dollars in combined military reimbursement and security assistance. In addition, the Enhanced Partnership with Pakistan Act (2009) (often referenced in policy discussions) authorized roughly US\$1.5 billion per year in civilian aid for a multi-year period, contingent on benchmarks and oversight. Over the whole post-9/11 period, cumulative U.S. assistance (military +

economic + CSF reimbursements) is commonly cited in the many-billion-dollars range; estimates differ by how reimbursements, private security contracts and non-budgetary support are counted.

Operational leverage and conditionality: Aid enabled Pakistan to fund counter-insurgency operations and relief for internally displaced persons, but it also created political leverage: pauses, delays or conditionality in assistance became tools in moments of bilateral tension.

**Table 6:** U.S.–Pakistan assistance: approximate milestones

Period	Key feature	Commonly cited magnitude / note
2001–2009	Post-9/11 surge in security cooperation & CSF reimbursements	Several billion USD
2009 (Enhanced Partnership act)	Authorized civilian assistance packages	~US\$1.5bn/year authorized for FY2010–FY2014
2011 onward	Episodes of suspension / review after bilateral incidents	Aid flows became more conditional after high-profile crises

### Accusations of a “double game”

Throughout 2001–2021 U.S. policymakers, some Afghan officials, and international commentators repeatedly accused Pakistan — or at least elements within Pakistan’s security establishment — of pursuing a “double game”: cooperating with the U.S. to counter Al-Qaeda and some militant networks while tolerating, cultivating, or exercising restraint toward other militant groups (notably certain Afghan Taliban factions and the Haqqani network) viewed as instruments of strategic depth in Afghanistan.

Three high-profile episodes intensified such accusations:

Capture of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (1 March 2003): A major counterterrorism success involving Pakistani security services and U.S. intelligence cooperation, cited as evidence of close operational ties.

Abbottabad raid (2 May 2011): U.S. special forces killed Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad. The fact that bin Laden was found and killed in Pakistan, and that the U.S. did not notify Pakistani authorities in advance, generated intense international and domestic scrutiny and renewed suspicions about whether all Pakistani institutions had been fully committed to finding him.

Salala NATO airstrike (26 November 2011): NATO/ISAF airstrikes killed 24 Pakistani soldiers at two border posts in Mohmand Agency. Pakistan temporarily closed NATO

supply lines to Afghanistan and relations plunged into a diplomatic crisis; the episode brought mistrust to the fore on both sides.

These incidents did not end the bilateral relationship, but they produced cycles of cooperation, recrimination, and recalibration that shaped policy choices on both sides.

### Relations with Afghanistan

#### Border tensions and allegations of harboring militants

Pakistan–Afghanistan relations during 2001–2021 were dominated by mutual suspicion about cross-border militancy and sanctuary (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2008)<sup>[40]</sup>

The Durand Line remained porous, and militants exploited the geography to move between Pakistani tribal areas and Afghan provinces.

Multiple Afghan administrations publicly accused Pakistan of tolerating or supporting Taliban elements that attacked Afghan government and coalition targets. Afghan presidents and officials raised these accusations repeatedly in diplomatic exchanges, press statements and international fora.

Pakistan countered that it faced its own militant threats and that Afghan territory was also used as sanctuary for militants attacking Pakistan.

**Table 7:** Pakistan–Afghanistan border tensions: key moments

Occurrence	Date	Significance
Public Afghan accusations of mixed policies	Recurrent (notably 2010–2015)	Afghan leaders repeatedly alleged Pakistan’s tolerance for some Taliban elements
Cross-border militant incidents	2000s–2010s	Persistent source of clash and military action on both sides
Border fencing & controls (accelerated efforts)	Late 2010s	Pakistan began more systematic fencing and border management to reduce infiltration

### Pakistan’s influence in Afghan Taliban resurgence

Pakistan’s historical links to Afghan insurgent networks (dating back to the 1980s and 1990s) meant Islamabad was widely perceived as having leverage over some Taliban factions. During the later years of the U.S. presence in Afghanistan Pakistan played a role as a regional interlocutor and facilitator:

Facilitation of talks and logistic contacts: Pakistan was repeatedly described by regional analysts and parties to be a

channel of contact between Taliban leaders and international negotiators. Islamabad hosted or facilitated meetings, transit and communications that helped bring Taliban interlocutors into negotiation tracks.

Doha process: From roughly 2018 onward the U.S.–Taliban dialogue gathered pace, and Pakistan was viewed as an important regional facilitator in the run-up to the U.S.–Taliban agreement signed on 29 February 2020. While Pakistan’s contacts were helpful in assembling delegations,

its actual ability to control all Taliban actors and prevent violent spoilers was limited.

### Relations with Other Powers

#### China strategic backing and economic deepening

China emerged as Pakistan's most consequential strategic partner during the GWOT era and especially in the 2010s:

China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC): Announced and accelerated in the 2013–2015 period as part of China's Belt and Road Initiative, CPEC became the flagship economic and

strategic project for bilateral ties. Chinese investments and project commitments under CPEC were commonly described in policy discourse as tens of billions of U.S. dollars (the exact total depends on project inclusion and accounting).

Diplomatic support: China provided persistent diplomatic backing for Pakistan in multilateral forums and cultivated defense and intelligence cooperation. As relations with Washington experienced tensions, China became an increasingly important partner that reduced Islamabad's strategic isolation.

**Table 8:** China–Pakistan highlights

Area	Period	Note
CPEC launch & major MOUs	2013–2015	Large infrastructure & energy projects; investment pledges in multi-\$bn range
Security & diplomatic backing	2000s–2020s	China provided diplomatic support and enhanced military ties

#### Russia shifting stance and pragmatic engagement

After decades of limited interaction, Russia and Pakistan began a gradual rapprochement in the 2010s:

Thaw in relations: By the mid-2010s Russia and Pakistan had begun more visible diplomatic, economic and security contacts, including high-level visits and discussions about defense cooperation.

Geopolitical context: Russia's engagement reflected changing regional calculations (reduction of the U.S. unipolar moment, pragmatism toward Afghanistan, and interest in deeper ties across Eurasia).

#### Middle Eastern allies financial support and expectations

Gulf States were important economic partners for Pakistan through remittances, deposits, loans and political support:

Saudi Arabia: Historically a close partner, Saudi Arabia provided pledges and deposits during Pakistani balance-of-payments crises. For example, in 2018 Saudi Arabia publicly committed multi-billion-dollar packages and assurances of financial support that helped stabilize Pakistan's external position.

United Arab Emirates: The UAE also provided emergency deposits and investment commitments in crisis periods (late 2010s), serving as important short-term financial backstops.

Expectation of alignment: Gulf partners expected political goodwill from Pakistan on regional issues and, in return, often demanded diplomatic alignment and cooperation.

#### International implications of Pakistan's role

Balance of dependence and leverage: Pakistan's cooperation with the U.S. brought substantial material and operational benefits, but also produced dependence and exposure to conditionality. At the same time, Pakistan leveraged relations with China and Gulf states to diversify support and reduce sole reliance on Washington.

Ambiguity and mistrust: Pakistan's simultaneous roles, frontline ally in some respects and accused tolerate of select militant groups in others, created a persistent ambiguity. That

ambiguity complicated U.S. relations, produced recurring Afghan complaints, and left Islamabad navigating a tense diplomacy in which cooperation and suspicion coexisted.

Regional realignment: The 2010s witnessed an important strategic recalibration: CPEC deepened China–Pakistan ties; Russia warmed to Islamabad; Gulf states remained important financial partners. These dynamics gave Pakistan alternatives and bargaining power, altering the regional strategic equilibrium even as the GWOT continued to shape security priorities.

### 6. Key Turning Points (2001–2021)

#### 6.1. 2001–2008: Musharraf Era Alliance Consolidation and Rising Insurgency

**Overview (2001–2004).** After the 9/11 attacks, General Pervez Musharraf made a landmark announcement on 19 September 2001, declaring that Pakistan would join the U.S.-led "War on Terror." Pakistan granted the U.S. over flight rights, intelligence sharing, and logistics support. This decision brought international recognition and significant financial aid, but it also generated strong domestic opposition (Aziz, M. 2008)<sup>[5]</sup>.

**Aid and Cooperation,** between 2001 and 2008, Pakistan received billions of dollars in military and economic assistance, including Coalition Support Funds (CSF) reimbursements for counterterrorism operations. These funds were critical for financing Pakistan's military deployments in tribal areas.

**Rising Insurgency,** Militancy spread across the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa during this period. The Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) operation in July 2007 triggered widespread backlash, while the formation of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in December 2007 consolidated insurgent activity against the state.

**Table 9:** 2001–2008 Snapshot

Happening	Date	Significance
Musharraf aligns with U.S.	Sep 2001	Pakistan provides intelligence, airspace, and logistics support.
Aid flows (CSF & U.S. assistance)	2001–2008	Billions in reimbursements and aid strengthen military operations.
Emergence of TTP	Dec 2007	Consolidated militant groups challenge Pakistan internally.
Lal Masjid Operation	Jul 2007	Increased radicalization and violent backlash.

## 6.2. 2008–2014: Democratic Transition Terrorism Intensifies and Drone Strikes

**Terrorism Surge.** With the democratic transition after Musharraf, suicide bombings and high-profile terrorist attacks rose sharply across Pakistan. Major cities, markets, and security installations were frequent targets.

**Drone Strikes Controversy.** The U.S. drone campaign in Pakistan's tribal belt expanded during this period. Between 2006 and 2014, independent trackers reported hundreds of drone strikes, with estimated fatalities running into the low thousands. While drones eliminated key militant leaders, they were widely criticized in Pakistan for violating sovereignty and causing civilian casualties.

**Table 10:** 2008–2014 Overview

Event	Period	Significance
Democratic transition	2008	New civilian governments faced intensified terrorism.
Drone campaign peaks	2006–2014	Hundreds of strikes, thousands killed; sovereignty concerns dominate politics.
Civil–military tension	Ongoing	Disagreements on U.S. alliance and internal counterterror policy.

## 6.3. 2011: Osama Bin Laden Operation, Abbottabad Raid and Fallout

**Abbottabad Raid (Operation Neptune Spear).** On 2 May 2011, U.S. Navy SEALs conducted a covert raid in Abbottabad, Pakistan, killing Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. The unilateral operation, carried out without Pakistan's prior knowledge, led to intense diplomatic fallout. Impact. Pakistan faced international embarrassment that bin Laden was found in its territory, while the U.S. questioned Pakistan's commitment. Domestically, the incident fueled anger about sovereignty violations and intelligence lapses.

## 6.4. 2014–2018: Military Operations Intensify Zarb-e-Azb and APS Peshawar

**Zarb-e-Azb Operation.** Following the Karachi airport attack on 8 June 2014, Pakistan launched Operation Zarb-e-Azb on 15 June 2014 in North Waziristan. Around 30,000 troops participated. Official reports claimed several thousand militants killed, while nearly 1 million residents were displaced.

**APS Peshawar Massacre.** On 16 December 2014, TTP militants attacked the Army Public School (APS) in Peshawar, killing 149 people (mostly children). The massacre shocked the nation and led to the formulation of the National Action Plan (NAP) to counter terrorism with stronger military and legal measures.

## 6.5. 2018–2021: Imran Khan Era Doha Talks and U.S. Withdrawal

**Peace Facilitation.** Under Prime Minister Imran Khan, Pakistan positioned itself as a facilitator in the U.S.–Taliban negotiations that began in 2018. These efforts led to the Doha Agreement signed on 29 February 2020, setting a framework for U.S. withdrawal.

**U.S. Withdrawal and Taliban Takeover.** By August 2021, U.S. and NATO forces had fully withdrawn from Afghanistan. On 15 August 2021, the Taliban captured Kabul, forcing Pakistan to recalibrate its policy. Islamabad emphasized border management, refugee control, and

maintaining influence in post-withdrawal Afghanistan.

## 6.6. Why These Turning Points Matter

2001 alignment with the U.S. positioned Pakistan as a frontline ally but triggered domestic militancy. 2008–2014 terrorism surge and drone strikes deepened anti-American sentiment and political instability. 2011 Abbottabad raid strained U.S.–Pakistan ties and embarrassed Pakistan globally. 2014 Zarb-e-Azb and APS Peshawar massacre represented a turning point in Pakistan's military response and public consensus against terrorism. 2020 Doha talks and 2021 U.S. withdrawal ended a two-decade war but created new strategic dilemmas for Pakistan.

## 7. Critical Analysis

### 7.1 Pakistan's achievements

Pakistan achieved several concrete and measurable results during 2001–2021 that strengthened its counterterrorism posture and influenced regional politics.

### 1. Significant militant networks dismantled

**High-value captures and kills:** Cooperation (overt and covert) between Pakistani agencies and foreign partners helped produce arrests and removals of senior militants. Notable examples frequently cited are the capture of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (captured in Pakistan/nearby in 2003) and a series of raids and detentions that disrupted Al-Qaeda and affiliated networks in the mid-2000s and beyond.

**Operational degradation of sanctuaries:** Large military offensives (for example, Operation Rah-e-Nijat, 2009; Operation Zarb-e-Azb, 2014) dismantled many established militant safe havens in South and North Waziristan. Official tallies from those operations list militant fatalities in the hundreds to low thousands per operation and forced senior cadres to disperse or hide.

**Result:** These actions removed prominent safe havens inside Pakistan and fragmented the operational capability of several groups that had previously operated with relative impunity.

**Table 11:** Selected dismantling milestones

Action / event	Date	Immediate effect
Capture of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed	2003	Major disruption to Al-Qaeda leadership network
Operation Rah-e-Nijat	19 Jun 2009	Cleared large parts of South Waziristan; large militant casualties reported
Operation Zarb-e-Azb	15 Jun 2014	Major offensive in North Waziristan; thousands of militants reported killed or displaced

## 2. Enhanced counterterrorism capacity

**Institutional strengthening:** Over the 2000s–2010s Pakistan expanded and professionalized elements of its counterterrorism architecture — military doctrine for internal operations, paramilitary deployments in tribal zones, and civilian counterterrorism institutions (for example, formalization of national coordination mechanisms and expanded capabilities for intelligence-led raids and explosive ordnance disposal).

**Police and CTD development:** Provincial Counter Terrorism Departments (CTDs) and federal units (e.g., rapid reaction forces, improvements in forensics and explosive-ordnance teams) were strengthened, improving the capacity to respond to urban attacks and IED threats.

**Operational outcomes:** From roughly 2015 onward many observers noted a sustained reduction in the frequency of large-scale attacks inside major urban centers compared with the peak years of 2008–2014 — an outcome generally attributed to combined military pressure, intelligence operations, and police counterterror measures.

## 3. Role in U.S.–Taliban negotiations and regional diplomacy

**Facilitation and access:** Pakistan acted as a regional interlocutor and facilitator for contacts between the Taliban, regional actors and the U.S. in the late 2010s. Islamabad’s contacts and its geographic position made it a practical channel for dialogue that contributed to the Doha negotiation track (talks accelerated in 2018–2020 and led to the U.S.–Taliban agreement of 29 February 2020).

**Influence:** Even if Islamabad could not control all factions, its role as a convener and guarantor for certain contacts gave it diplomatic leverage and placed Pakistan at the center of

post-conflict bargaining over Afghanistan’s future.

## 7.2. Criticisms of Pakistan’s role

While achieving important counterterrorism outcomes, Pakistan’s policies and practices attracted persistent and serious criticisms — many of which undermined trust with international partners and complicated regional stabilization.

### 1. Allegations of duplicity and harboring terrorists

**“Double game” accusation:** U.S. and Afghan officials repeatedly accused elements within Pakistan’s security establishment of maintaining ties to selected militant groups (in particular some Afghan Taliban factions and the Haqqani network) in order to preserve influence in Afghanistan. These allegations intensified after major incidents such as the Abbottabad raid (2 May 2011) and recurring discoveries of militant sanctuaries.

**Diplomatic consequences:** High-profile bilateral tensions followed; episodic U.S. suspensions or recalibrations of aid and public statements of frustration were part of the bilateral pattern. Even when cooperation continued operationally, rhetorical and political distrust remained a substantial cost.

### 2. Failure to fully control cross-border militancy

**Persistent attacks:** Despite military offensives that degraded many networks, cross-border militancy and attacks inside Pakistan continued. High-casualty events during 2008–2015 (for example, the Army Public School attack, 16 December 2014) demonstrated militants’ continued lethal capacity.

**Organizational resilience and fragmentation:** Operations often fragmented groups into smaller cells or caused temporary displacement rather than permanent elimination. The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and affiliated splinter groups demonstrated resilience, sometimes relocating, regrouping, or returning in new forms.

**Table 12:** Key criticisms and illustrative evidence

Criticism	Illustrative evidence / events	Implication
Duplicity / selective toleration	Abbottabad raid (2011); repeated U.S. public complaints	Undermined bilateral trust; complicated cooperation
Incomplete control over militancy	APS Peshawar (2014); continuing TTP attacks	Showed limits of military campaigns and intelligence reach
Sanctuary allegations (Afghan theatre)	Persistent Afghan claims of Pakistan’s toleration for some Taliban elements	Fuelled Afghan–Pakistan tensions and regional instability

## 7.3. Cost–Benefit evaluation

This section weighs the short-term strategic and material gains Pakistan obtained against the long-term costs borne by the country.

### Short-term gains and benefits

**Material and financial aid:** Pakistan obtained substantial financial assistance after 2001 (military reimbursements, Coalition Support Funds, and development aid). Estimates of cumulative U.S. assistance for the early post-9/11 decade are often stated in the multi-billion USD range and helped Pakistan finance large internal security operations and relief for displaced civilians.

**Operational successes:** Key arrests/killings of senior militant figures, dismantling of major safe havens and improved domestic counterterror capacity produced immediate security

dividends — reduced incidence of very large, coordinated attacks in certain periods and regained governmental control over territory previously dominated by militants.

**Diplomatic leverage:** Pakistan’s role as a facilitator in Afghan talks enhanced its regional diplomatic relevance and gave Islamabad bargaining chips in negotiations over Afghanistan’s transition.

### Long-term costs and liabilities

**Human toll:** Pakistan paid a heavy human price. Aggregated civilian and security-force fatalities attributable to terrorism and counterterrorism operations across the 2000s and 2010s are commonly placed in the tens of thousands (many consolidated tallies cite ranges roughly 50,000–70,000 or higher when militant fatalities are included). Countless more were injured, and psychological trauma especially among

children and survivors — is long-lasting.

**Economic cost:** The macroeconomic impact of two decades of terrorism (lost output, destroyed infrastructure, higher security spending, loss of investment and tourism) is often estimated in the tens to low hundreds of billions of USD cumulatively across the period; commonly cited midrange estimates fall in the \$100–150 billion bracket depending on methodology and time horizon. These costs reduced growth, increased fiscal pressure, and diverted resources from development.

**Internal displacement and social disruption:** Military campaigns produced large waves of internally displaced persons (IDPs) — often hundreds of thousands to more than a million during peak operations (for example the IDP peaks during Rah-e-Nijat and Zarb-e-Azb). Rehabilitation and

reconstruction have been partial and slow in many areas.

**Diplomatic mistrust and reputational cost:** Persistent allegations of selective toleration damaged Pakistan's international credibility with some partners and complicated cooperation. Periodic suspensions or conditionality in aid, and international scrutiny (including FATF grey-listing at times for financial controls) had diplomatic and economic side-effects.

**Political and governance impact:** The security focus strengthened the military's role in shaping policy, sometimes at the expense of civilian authority and long-term institutional development; domestic polarization rose as Islamist narratives and anti-Western sentiment spread in parts of society.

**Table 13:** Cost–Benefit snapshot

Category	Short-term benefit	Long-term cost / magnitude (approx.)
Financial/material	Billions in U.S. aid and reimbursements (2001–2010s)	Economic loss estimates across period: ~\$100–150 billion (approx.)
Security	Removal of many militant sanctuaries; key captures (2003, 2009, 2014 etc.)	Continued insurgent resilience; tens of thousands dead (civilians + forces)
Political/diplomatic	Regional facilitator role (Doha 2018–2020)	Recurrent mistrust with U.S. and Afghanistan; reputational harm
Social/humanitarian	IDP assistance & return programs	Hundreds of thousands > 1 million IDPs during major operations; slow recovery

#### 7.4. Overall judgment

Net effect is mixed. Pakistan's cooperation with global counterterrorism efforts produced undeniable tactical and operational successes: major militant networks were weakened, counterterrorism institutions and capacities were built, and Pakistan retained regional relevance.

But outcomes were costly and incomplete. Gains were often temporary and achieved at the expense of vast human, economic and political costs. The persistence of cross-border militancy, repeated high-casualty attacks, and continuing international suspicion over Pakistan's selective policies imply that the two decades of engagement left Pakistan better equipped in some ways but also more deeply burdened and politically constrained.

**Policy implication:** Moving forward, Pakistan's best path would include institutionalizing civilian oversight of counterterror tools, sustained investment in socio-economic reconstruction of affected areas, rigorous financial controls against terror financing, transparent diplomacy, and stronger border management — measures likely to produce more sustainable long-term benefits than episodic military offensives alone.

#### 8. Conclusion

The trajectory of Pakistan's role in the Global War on Terror (GWOT) from 2001 to 2021 reflects both the complexities of regional geopolitics and the duality of costs and benefits that defined its strategic choices. Historically, Pakistan's involvement in Afghanistan beginning with its support for the Afghan Jihad (1979–1989) and later the Taliban in the 1990s shaped its security and foreign policy posture leading into the post-9/11 era. After the attacks of September 11, 2001, Pakistan faced an unprecedented strategic dilemma. General Pervez Musharraf's decision to ally with the United States ushered Pakistan into the frontline of a global conflict. This alliance brought Pakistan billions of dollars in financial

assistance, military modernization, and diplomatic leverage, yet simultaneously exposed the country to an immense security, political, and socio-economic burden.

Domestically, Pakistan bore the brunt of retaliatory militancy as terrorist networks, once cultivated for strategic depth, turned their weapons inward. The rise of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) transformed tribal areas into battlegrounds, with major cities also experiencing devastating attacks. Iconic tragedies such as the 2009 Marriott Hotel bombing and the 2014 Army Public School Peshawar massacre symbolized the grave internal consequences of Pakistan's involvement in the GWOT. The statistics are sobering: by 2021, Pakistan had lost over 70,000 lives and incurred economic damages exceeding \$120 billion, while displacement from military operations disrupted the lives of hundreds of thousands of citizens. These outcomes left deep scars on the social fabric, undermined economic progress, and tested the resilience of Pakistani society.

On the international front, Pakistan's partnership with the United States oscillated between strategic necessity and deep mistrust. Washington accused Islamabad of pursuing a “double game” fighting certain militant groups while sheltering others culminating in a crisis of credibility after the Osama bin Laden raid in Abbottabad (2011). Simultaneously, Pakistan faced strained relations with Afghanistan, which persistently accused it of harboring Taliban sanctuaries that fueled cross-border insurgency. Yet, despite these tensions, Pakistan successfully leveraged its influence over the Taliban to remain indispensable in regional diplomacy, particularly by facilitating the Doha peace process (2018–2020) that paved the way for the eventual U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, Pakistan's relations with other global powers evolved in response to these shifting dynamics. China consistently backed Pakistan diplomatically and economically, particularly through the China–Pakistan

Economic Corridor (CPEC), offering Islamabad a counterbalance to U.S. pressure. Russia's pragmatic engagement in the later years signaled a shift in regional alignments, while Middle Eastern partners continued to expect Pakistan to balance its counterterror commitments with broader Islamic solidarity. Thus, Pakistan's role in the GWOT both isolated and empowered it on the world stage, highlighting its unique position as both a security risk and a security partner.

Critical analysis of this two-decade period underscores the paradoxes of Pakistan's choices. On one hand, Islamabad dismantled significant militant networks, built substantial counterterrorism capacity, and reasserted its indispensability in Afghan peace efforts. On the other, it suffered staggering human and economic losses, remained unable to fully eliminate militant safe havens, and endured a reputational crisis due to persistent allegations of duplicity. The short-term benefits of aid, military modernization, and strategic leverage were outweighed by long-term instability, internal fragmentation, and diplomatic mistrust.

In conclusion, Pakistan's role in the Global War on Terror was simultaneously that of a victim, a frontline ally, and a contested actor. Its sacrifices were immense, its gains tangible but fleeting, and its legacy ambivalent. The key lesson for Pakistan lies in moving beyond short-term tactical calculations toward a comprehensive national security framework that integrates counterterrorism with socio-economic reform, regional cooperation, and credible diplomacy. Only through such a recalibration can Pakistan convert its troubled experience in the GWOT into a foundation for sustainable stability, regional peace, and restored global credibility.

### Policy Recommendations

Based on the analysis of Pakistan's two-decade-long engagement in the Global War on Terror (GWOT), several policy recommendations emerge to address the lessons learned and to strengthen Pakistan's future security, diplomacy, and development trajectory.

#### 1. Strengthening Domestic Security Framework

**Institutionalize Counterterrorism Measures:** Pakistan should consolidate gains made through military operations (e.g., Zarb-e-Azb, Radd-ul-Fasaad) by empowering civilian law enforcement agencies, ensuring effective policing, and enhancing the capacity of the National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA).

**Focus on Deradicalization Programs:** Alongside military efforts, investment in educational reforms, rehabilitation centers, and counter-extremism narratives through media and local communities is essential to weaken militant recruitment.

**Border Management:** Fencing and surveillance of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border should be completed and maintained with advanced technology to curb cross-border militancy and smuggling networks.

#### 2. Balancing Civil-Military Relations

**Shared Counterterrorism Strategy:** Civilian and military institutions must develop unified security strategies to avoid policy confusion and contradictions witnessed during GWOT.

**Parliamentary Oversight:** Greater involvement of Parliament

in security decision-making will build public trust and enhance the legitimacy of counterterror operations.

#### 3. Regional Diplomacy and Stability

**Rebuild Trust with Afghanistan:** Pakistan should prioritize stable relations with Kabul through joint border security mechanisms, intelligence-sharing, and economic partnerships to reduce mutual mistrust.

**Peace Facilitation Role:** Building on its role in the Doha talks, Pakistan should position itself as a facilitator of broader regional peace initiatives to secure long-term influence in Afghanistan's political future.

**Regional Counterterror Network:** Engage with China, Russia, Iran, and Central Asian states to develop a regional security mechanism aimed at combating transnational terrorism.

#### 4. International Relations and Credibility

**Diversify Strategic Partnerships:** While U.S. ties remain important, Pakistan must strengthen its partnerships with China, Russia, Turkey, and Gulf states to avoid over-dependence on any single ally.

**Transparent Counterterrorism Policy:** To overcome allegations of duplicity, Pakistan must adopt greater transparency in counterterrorism efforts, including credible reporting of militant arrests and dismantled networks.

**Compliance with Global Norms:** Sustained commitment to Financial Action Task Force (FATF) guidelines on terror financing and money laundering will help restore Pakistan's economic credibility.

#### 5. Socio-Economic Reforms and Human Security

**Economic Recovery Plans:** Redirect resources from prolonged militarization toward rebuilding conflict-affected areas, creating job opportunities, and restoring infrastructure in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and former FATA.

**Education and Social Development:** Expand access to quality education and vocational training as a long-term strategy to counter extremism.

**Support for Displaced Populations:** Develop comprehensive rehabilitation programs for internally displaced persons (IDPs), ensuring housing, healthcare, and reintegration into society.

#### 6. Strategic Lessons for the Future

Pakistan must avoid short-term tactical alignments that yield temporary financial or diplomatic gains but undermine long-term stability.

A national security framework integrating military, economic, and social dimensions should replace ad hoc responses to crises.

Credible diplomacy, rooted in consistency and transparency, is essential for Pakistan's international reputation and influence.

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