

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

Quest for Regional Peace: Sour Pakistan-
Afghanistan Relations and the Way
Forward



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Rector's Message

The National School of Public Policy (NSPP), through its National Institute of Public Policy (NIPP), continues to uphold its mandate as the premier national institution dedicated to fostering research-based discourse on issues of critical importance to Pakistan. The recent Roundtable Discussion on “*Quest for Regional Peace: Sour Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations and the Way Forward*” reflects our enduring commitment to provide a platform where the complexities of international relations, regional security and international law are examined in a holistic and constructive manner.

The latest episode between Pakistan and Afghanistan had unfurled the diplomatic momentum gained in the beginning of 2025. The attempts by the Pakistan government to normalize the relationship with Afghanistan have been thwarted by the Afghan Taliban by their refusal to take stringent action against Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The reluctance by Afghan Taliban has led to instability across the western border of Pakistan and to a new low in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations which has in turn also created a window of opportunity for India to further its own ambitions in the region. Whilst India has not officially recognized the Afghan Taliban government, its announcement to upgrade the technical mission to the status of an embassy heralds change.

This dialogue brought together eminent experts and practitioners from diverse fields who deliberated on the deteriorating Pakistan-Afghanistan relations and explored viable diplomatic, security, and citizen-centric responses. The discussions highlighted the importance of enhancing people to people interaction through cultural, media and student exchanges. Way forward, this report aims to guide federal and provincial policymakers, defense experts, and civil society stakeholders.

It is my earnest hope that the insights gathered herein will serve as a catalyst for concrete policy action and enable Pakistan to navigate this critical challenge with wisdom, unity, and foresight.

Dr. Muhammad Jamil Afaqi

National School of Public Policy

Foreword by Dean NIPP

The Pakistan–Afghanistan relationship has long stood at the crossroads of history, geopolitics, and human emotion. The two nations, bound by geography and intertwined through culture, faith, and kinship, have endured decades of turbulence shaped by shifting regional dynamics and global interventions. This report brings together a diverse set of perspectives—strategic, diplomatic, analytical, and humanitarian—to offer a multidimensional understanding of one of South Asia’s most complex bilateral relationships.

The insights presented by Lt. Gen. (R) Bilal Akbar, Mr. Mansoor Ahmad Khan, Mr. Aamir Ghauri, and Dr. Aamer Raza collectively reflect the depth and diversity of thought required to navigate the challenges at hand. Their analyses—spanning security imperatives, diplomatic realities, historical grievances, and the human consequences of conflict—underscore that peace and cooperation between Pakistan and Afghanistan cannot be built on politics alone. They must rest on mutual respect, sustained dialogue, and genuine people-to-people engagement.

At NIPP, we believe in fostering meaningful discourse that transcends traditional narratives and focuses on pragmatic solutions. Therefore, I hope that this roundtable discussion and this report, produced by synthesizing these vital perspectives, contributes to scholarly and policy discourse and also serves as a call to introspection. It reminds us that the search for stability in the region begins with understanding, empathy, and an unwavering commitment to coexistence.

Dr. Naveed Elahi

Team NIPP

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Panellists of the Roundtable Discussion

<p>Lt. Gen. (R) Bilal Akbar Former Chief of General Staff, Pakistan Army</p>	
<p>Mr. Mansoor Ahmad Khan Former Ambassador of Pakistan to Afghanistan</p>	
<p>Mr. Aamir Ghauri Resident Editor, The News</p>	
<p>Dr. Aamer Raza Assistant Professor, University of Peshawar</p>	

Summary of the Proceedings

The NIPP organized a roundtable discussion on “*Quest for Regional Peace: Sour Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations and the Way Forward*” on Friday, 10th October, 2025.

The panel comprised leading experts including, Lt. Gen (R) Bilal Akbar, former Chief of Gen. Staff, Pakistan Army, Mr. Mansoor Ahmad Khan, former Ambassador of Pakistan to Afghanistan, Mr. Aamir Ghauri, Resident Editor of The News and Dr. Aamer Raza, Assistant Professor, University of Peshawar. The session was moderated by Dr. Naveed Elahi, Dean, NIPP. It was attended by Research Associates, Dr. Saif Ullah Khalid, Mr. Jahanzeb Waheed and Ms. Sadia Pirzada.

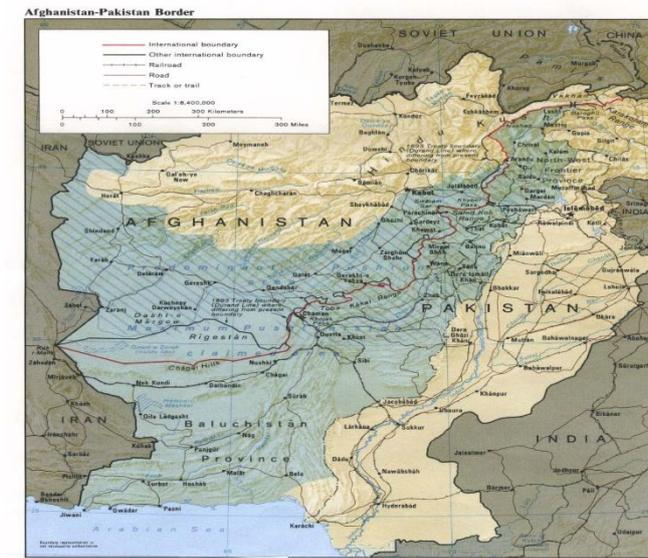
Dean, Dr. Naveed Elahi, welcomed the panellists and attendees at the roundtable discussion. He opened the session by contextualizing and historicizing the Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. With the context setting, he brought the attention to the current times when relations have further nose-dived. He noted that the Afghan Taliban government have refused to take action against the terrorist groups operating from within their land despite Pakistan’s repeated requests. The relationship has been further strained as Pakistan has also recently announced to deport Afghan refugees. As diplomatic engagements have not borne fruit and trust remains fragile, Dean NIPP stated that the roundtable has been organized to anticipate the trajectory of the relations, and devise a strategy which ensures a long-lasting peace, if possible, in the region. NIPP’s research associate Ms. Sadia Pirzada prepared the historical background of the issue, by dividing each period into phases, the thematic issues which emerged in each phase were highlighted. This setting allowed the panellists to deliberate on the issue ranging from diplomatic, security, international politics and economic aspects and way forward.

The panellists deliberated upon the recent lowest ebb between the two countries and the implications the poor relations contained for the region. They discussed the issue from the lens of diplomacy, security, and media. Whilst some of the panellists did not completely rule out kinetic action against the terrorists operating from within Afghan soil, they urged for track-II diplomacy encouraging people-to-people interaction, cultural exchanges, empowering Afghan women etc., to build good faith and trust with the Afghan people for an enduring peace.

NIPP aims to build consensus on actionable strategies emerging from the roundtable for effective policy implementation. Several recommendations gleaned from the discussion have been incorporated into this report.

Road Map of the Roundtable Discussion

Context and Rationale



NIPP convened a high-level Roundtable Discussion (RTD) in response to a strategic inflection point in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. Following the drone strikes in Afghanistan in late August 2025, it blamed Pakistan and handed over a demarche to the Pakistan's mission in Kabul. This rhetoric was maintained when in September 2025, the Afghanistan Defense Minister accused Pakistan of blaming Afghanistan for its

own security shortcomings. Whilst these remarks were dismissed by Pakistan's Foreign Office, it asked Afghanistan to not downplay the threats and called for joint efforts. However, pressure and criticism were amplified when the Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif called on Afghanistan to "choose between Pakistan and TTP". Whilst US has called on both countries to engage with each other, Pakistan has warned UN Security Council of terror threat it faces from Afghanistan.

The RTD was convened to address the urgent need to deliberate over the deteriorating Pakistan-Afghanistan relationship and way forward to ensure that the regional stability is not threatened. For this purpose, critical questions such as should Pakistan prepare for military retaliation or through diplomatic engagement to tackle with Afghan backed terrorism? Why the Afghan Taliban are bent on supporting TTP at the cost of Pakistan's interest? And Is India involved in undermining Pak Afghan relations or taking benefit of it? need urgent, immediate and calibrated response.

This RTD brought together senior military, civil bureaucrats and sector experts to debate these questions in a rigorous and forward-looking manner. By drawing on historical and latest geopolitical developments, the session sought to establish a shared understanding of the risks, responsibilities, and actionable options for Pakistan.

Content Analysis: Historical Context

To inform the Roundtable Discussion, historicization of the Pakistan-Afghanistan relations was necessary. This was undertaken by the research team at the National Institute of Public Policy.

The goal was to examine how over the years the relationship between the two countries has fared and what factors contributed to the current situation. The contextualization of the issue would lead to an informed understanding to showcase that the recent lowest ebb in relations is not an isolated incident, rather is a trajectory of an unsteady and fragile relationship between two neighbourly countries who despite sharing a culture, religion and history is deeply distrustful and hostile to the other.

Background of Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations

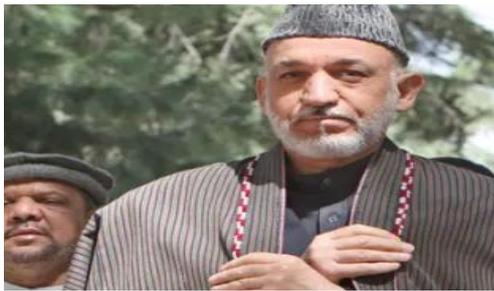


Figure 1: 'Karzai says Pakistan pursuing double game' (Oct 3, 2011- Al Jazeera)

Despite shared history, culture and border, the relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan has been mired in distrust, mutual suspicion and animosity. Whilst there have been episodes of brief cooperation, but these have been largely overwhelmed by prolonged and catastrophic political overtures. To showcase the unsteadiness

of the relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan, Figures 1-3 highlight the continuous flux in the relations, ranging from distrust, cynicism to warmness.

The seeds of a tumultuous relationship were sown the day Pakistan gained independence. As such, Pakistan-Afghanistan relations can be divided into 4



Figure 2: 'India a great friend, Pakistan twin brother: Karzai' (Oct 5, 2011-Dawn)

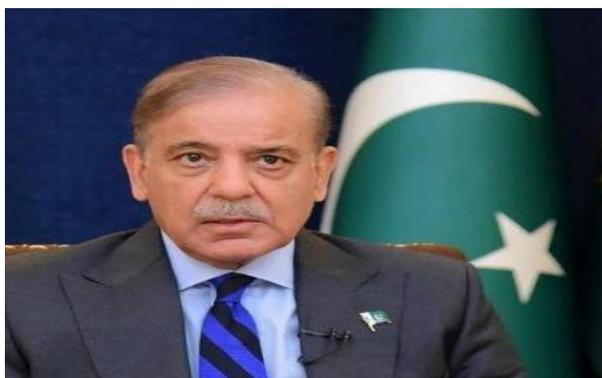


Figure 3: 'Choose between Pakistan and TTP, PM tells Kabul' (Sept 14, 2025-Dawn News)

phases: Phase I of early tensions begins from 1947-1978, Phase II which is the Soviet Union-Afghan war and the rise of the Mujahideen begins from 1979 and ends in 1988. This is followed by Phase III which is marred by civil war, the rise of Taliban, and The Post-9/11 Era begins from 1989 till 2021. This phase brings the Pakistan-Afghanistan relations to the current phase which is Phase IV begins August 2021 when the Taliban returned to power. The

phase-wise characterization of the relations brings in to the fore the different factors that contributed to the current impasse in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations.

Phase I: Early Tensions and The Cold War (1947-1978)

When Pakistan inherited the contested Durand Line as its international border in 1947, Afghanistan initially voted against for Pakistan's membership to UN and became the only country to do so (Alexander, 2010) alleging human rights violations in the tribal areas (Khan, 2025, p. 167). Although shortly afterwards, it withdrew its negative vote in October 1947 (Rahi, 2020), but in its 1949 Loya Jirga, Afghanistan unilaterally declared the Durand Line agreement null and void, and announced support for the 'Pashtunistan' movement (Afghan Studies Center, 2019). Ironically, it was Afghanistan which began to meddle in Pakistan's internal affairs, through its support for the Pashtunistan movement which was sometimes direct, and other times, covert. Such as in 1950, "Afghan airforce planes dropped leaflets in support of Pashtunistan, inside Pakistan's tribal areas" (Afghan Studies Center, 2019). Whereas in 1961, it supplied arms and ammunition to proxies in Bajaur's Batmalai area for an uprising (Afghan Studies Center, 2019). Hence, during the period of 1947-1978, Afghanistan's support for Pashtunistan remained consistent and was only put at a backburner when Afghanistan suffered from domestic political turmoil between 1964-1972 (Afghan Studies Center, 2019). This period also saw diplomatic and trade cut offs and in 1973, when Mohammed Daoud Khan, a staunch nationalist, rose to power by a coup d'etat, the support for the Pashtunistan proxies vehemently resumed. In 1978, Saur Revolution takes place in Afghanistan Mohammed Daoud Khan is killed and domestic instability begins to plague the Afghan politics.

Phase II: The Soviet-Afghan War and Rise of the Mujahideen (1979-1988)

In December 1979, upon the request of the communist government of Afghanistan to help fight against the anti-communist elements, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan (Afridi, Haroon, & Syed, 2022). This marks a turning point not only in the history of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations but also would have far reaching implications. During this period, with the support of US and Saudi Arabia, Pakistan became a 'Frontline State,' i.e., Pakistan became heavily involved in proxy war by channeling this funding to train the Mujahideen resistance (Afridi, Haroon, & Syed, 2022). Whilst this period cemented Pakistan's deep involvement in Afghanistan's internal affairs, the move to interfere also stemmed from Pakistan's own strategic interests which meant to protect its own borders.

As the Soviet Union continued its attacks which included scorch-earth operations and aerial bombing, "significant foreign players, including China, Saudi Arabia, the United States of America, and the United Kingdom, started providing the Mujahideen with superior weaponry

and resources through Pakistan” (Jalal, 2023). However, as the war became unsustainable for the Soviet Union, in 1988 Geneva Accords takes place. According to this Agreement, the Soviet Union withdraws, Pakistan and Afghanistan agree on non-interference and non-intervention and voluntary return of Afghan refugees. However, Pakistan’s influence over the various Mujahideen factions remained significant, setting the stage for the next chapter.

Phase III: Civil War, Taliban, and the Post-9/11 Era (1989-2021)

After the Soviet Union’s withdrawal, a devastating civil war broke out amongst the Mujahideen, causing massive instability and a continued influx of refugees into Pakistan. From this chaos, the Taliban emerged in 1994, a movement that Pakistan initially supported. By 1996, they established the Islamic Emirate, which Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE recognized. However, this period of normalization of Afghan-Pak relations is broken again. In Sept 2001, Al Qaeda assassinates Ahmad Shah, Northern Alliance leader, but just 2 days later, Al Qaeda carries out attack against the US. The post-9/11 era saw Pakistan become a key US ally in the War on Terror. However, this period was marred by accusations from the US, Afghanistan, and NATO that Pakistan was playing a ‘double game’—publicly supporting the coalition while privately maintaining ties to the Taliban.

Phase IV: The Taliban Return and a New Chapter (2021-Present)

In August 2021, following the US-Taliban Doha Agreement, the Taliban retook Afghanistan. Pakistan initially engaged with the new government, but tensions quickly rose as the Taliban refused to take action against the TTP, which uses Afghan soil to launch attacks into Pakistan. This led to a severe downturn in relations. In 2023, Pakistan began deporting undocumented Afghans, and cross-border skirmishes increased. In 2024, the situation escalated further with Pakistan declaring the TTP as ‘Fitna al Khawarij’ and even carrying out an aerial operation inside Afghanistan.

The relationship remains a paradox: since early 2025, efforts to revive diplomatic engagements with Afghan government were in process. This culminated in a high-level visit of Deputy PM Ishaq Dar to Afghanistan in April 2025 where security, bilateral and transit trade issues, including the Preferential Trade Agreement and Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement were also discussed. The diplomatic engagements slowly gained momentum when Pakistan announced the upgradation of its Chargé d’Affaires in Kabul to the level of Ambassador in May 2025 and signed the Framework Agreement on Joint Feasibility Study for the Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan (UAP) Railway Project in July 2025. This perception of

improving relations was further cemented when Afghanistan, during the 6th Trilateral Foreign Ministers Dialogue in August 2025, reaffirmed its commitment “to ensur[e] its territory is not used by any terrorist group against Pakistan or other nations” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs - Pakistan, 2025).

However, when drone strikes struck Afghanistan in late August 2025, it blamed Pakistan and handed over a demarche to its representative in Kabul. This rhetoric was maintained when in September 2025, the Afghanistan Defense Minister accused Pakistan of blaming Afghanistan for its own security shortcomings. Whilst these remarks were dismissed by Pakistan’s Foreign Office, it asked Afghanistan to not downplay the threats and called for joint efforts. However, pressure and criticism were amplified when the Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif called on Afghanistan to “choose between Pakistan and TTP” (Farooq, 2025).

Challenges Ahead

This complex history and current impasse present four major challenges ahead. First, with frequent border closures, widespread smuggling, and a massive informal trade economy, the economic impact is huge as it severely undermines official trade and building of reliable business relationship on both ends. Second, with regards to security and terrorism, the recent spike in cross-border attacks has dire implications for Pakistan’s border security and, critically, its internal domestic stability. Third, navigating skillfully through shifting diplomatic engagement and geopolitical alignments. The Pakistan-Afghanistan relationship requires careful diplomacy amidst growing India-Afghanistan nexus and shifting global interests. And fourth, calibrating the humanitarian impact and refugee repatriation. The policy of deporting Afghan refugees carries significant humanitarian consequences and continues to be a major point of contention. As UNHCR in early August 2025 stated that Pakistan has started deportation of registered Afghan refugees ahead of deadline. Whilst US has called on both countries to engage with each other, Pakistan has warned UN Security Council of terror threat it faces from Afghanistan.

Points to Ponder

The following questions were posed for the consideration of the panellists to set the course of discussion for policy recommendations:

1. Diplomacy, trade or kinetic force; How to deal with Afghan backed cross-border terrorism?

2. Why the Afghan Taliban are bent on supporting TTP at the cost of Pakistan's interest?
3. What are the strengths and weaknesses of Pakistan's ongoing policy and strategy to tackle TTP and handle Afghan Taliban?
4. What role can China and US play in mediating or stabilizing Pak-Afghan ties?
5. Is India involved in undermining Pak Afghan relations or taking benefit of it?
6. Are Pakistan's concerns related to Afghan refugees legitimate, or is this being used to pressure the Taliban?

Discussion by the Panellists

Lt. Gen. (R) Bilal Akbar

Lt. Gen. (R) Bilal Akbar gave an overview of the critical security and geopolitical complexities defining the relationship between Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban regime. He outlined the entrenched threats posed by militant collusion and analyzed the shifting regional landscape influenced by global conflicts. The security domain of the Pakistan-Afghanistan relationship is significantly complicated by the current reality of the Afghan Taliban (Tehrik-i-Taliban Afghanistan - TTA) controlling Kabul. This control is rooted in rural acceptance, a strategically inclusive narrative that co-opts Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara communities, and a centrally effective leadership.

He stated that the core security challenge for Pakistan stems from the collusion between the TTA and various hostile entities, including the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Islamic State – Khorasan (ISK), and Baloch militant organizations like the BLA and BRA. These groups leverage ungoverned spaces along the border and are sustained by large quantities of sophisticated weaponry and explosives left behind by the US forces. This situation is further exacerbated as the Defense Minister revealed that the Afghan government has demanded for a Rs. 10 billion package to relocate the TTP to Western Afghanistan provinces. This strongly suggests that, without financial incentive, these entities will continue to operate with impunity across the border. He further added that some of the elements within Afghan Taliban may also harbour a resurfacing “dream of a greater Emirate”.

Speaking about significant regional players, he stated that the potential escalation of the Russia-Ukraine conflict into a Russian-NATO confrontation increases the strategic relevance of former bases like Bagram. Whilst for Afghanistan, this would present an opportunity to garner

international support under current international isolation and may lead to relief in terms of funds, food, and energy security. This would in turn consolidate the TTA's hold on the country.

With respect to India, he stated that it has adopted a strategic stance to positively engage with whosoever controls Kabul. This has allowed India to gain ground with the Afghan Taliban whilst Pakistan has lost influence. Moreover, with effective nuclear and conventional deterrence established between Pakistan and India, the only remaining operational space for India is the subconventional domain. This is where India is operating by sponsoring entities tolerated by the Afghan government to conduct cross-border attacks against Pakistani forces in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). With these regional political dynamics at play, the matter of the Afghan refugee arises a political strategy viewed by the Afghan people as a strategic ploy to pressurize the Afghan Taliban government which reinforces anti-Pakistani sentiment among the Afghan public.

Lt. Gen. (R) Bilal Akbar concluded that there are no quick fixes to the complicated relationship between the two countries. The long-term goal must be the establishment of a friendly Afghanistan, irrespective of who holds power. He stated that the overarching policy should rest on a basic pillar of engagement with all segments of Afghan society and a commitment to non-interference in Afghanistan's internal affairs. This policy must be driven by the government in Islamabad, pursued with patience over a long-time horizon, and supported by a multi-pronged strategy. The final verdict is clear: Pakistan has no option other than friendship with Afghanistan across all domains for the sake of regional peace and its own national security.

Mr. Mansoor Ahmad Khan

Mr. Mansoor Ahmad Khan provided personal insights and international political and diplomatic perspective. He stated that during the first half of 2021, as the United States prepared to withdraw its forces, it was evident that Afghanistan was on the verge of major political change. In Pakistan, there was deep unease about what form that change would take. The memories of the 1990s—when the fall of the Najibullah government led to chaos, and Pakistan's own embassy in Kabul was attacked—were still vivid. Officials in Islamabad worried that the Taliban's return could once again unleash violence and instability that would inevitably spill over into Pakistan. In that uncertain environment, analysts, diplomats, and think tanks across both countries debated two possible scenarios. The first, and more widely held, was that if the Taliban seized power, they would fail to govern, plunging Afghanistan into renewed turmoil. A minority believed that the Taliban, having learned from their past mistakes,

might bring stability and avoid the excesses of their earlier rule. Four years later, he stated that neither prediction has fully materialized. Afghanistan under the Taliban has entered what can be called a third scenario—one in which the movement has consolidated control over the entire territory for the first time since 1979, yet remains internationally unrecognized, politically exclusive, and internally rigid.

Whilst the Taliban government have managed to impose a degree of order, he stated that they have not produced a constitutional framework, have restricted education for girls, and have shown little interest in broad-based governance or human rights reform. Despite their claim to be an interim government, they have been behaving as if their rule is indefinite. They have, however, adopted a calculated regional strategy to mitigate isolation. When they took Kabul in August 2021, only a handful of embassies operated in the capital; by 2025, nearly eighteen countries maintain diplomatic missions. The Taliban have engaged with the Moscow format and SCO processes, gaining cautious acceptance from Russia, China, Iran, and several Central Asian states. Russia has become the first to recognize them formally, and others deal with them pragmatically. By building this regional legitimacy, they seek to pressure Western powers for eventual recognition while insulating themselves from international sanctions and criticism.

Despite these adjustments, relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan remain fraught. The two neighbours have never been able to establish lasting trust. Since 1947, bilateral ties have been shaped by alternating patterns of cooperation and hostility—beginning with disputes over the Durand Line and Pashtunistan, followed by the proxy dynamics of the anti-Soviet jihad, the Mujahideen infighting of the 1990s, and the post-2001 alignment of successive Afghan governments against Islamabad. When the Taliban returned to power, many in Pakistan assumed that a shared history and mutual dependence would yield smoother relations. Instead, the same nationalist positions quickly resurfaced. The Taliban leadership reiterated its rejection of the Durand Line as an international border and pressed Pakistan to open trade routes with India through Wagah, a stance that resonated with many Afghans. Within weeks of their takeover, the body language of Taliban officials shifted from partnership to assertion. The long-standing Islamabad–Kabul mismatch reappeared, reflecting the enduring gap between Pakistan’s expectations and Afghanistan’s sense of sovereignty.

With regards to the recent downturn in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, he stated that at the core of the current tension lies the issue of cross-border terrorism. Pakistan faces persistent attacks from groups such as TTP, BLA etc., whose leadership and fighters operate from Afghan territory. The Taliban acknowledge these groups’ presence but claim that any aggressive action

could push militants toward the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), thereby threatening Taliban control. This argument masks both a capacity problem and a deliberate policy choice: Kabul appears reluctant to sever ties with militants it views as potential bargaining tools. The situation mirrors an earlier phase in reverse. In 2015, Kabul accused Pakistan of harbouring the Afghan Taliban; in 2025, Islamabad now demands that the Afghan Taliban curb the TTP. Both sides echo each other's past complaints, revealing how mutual mistrust has simply switched directions rather than disappeared.

He also stated that diplomatic rhetoric has hardened. Afghan Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi insists that no terrorist groups exist on Afghan soil and accuses neighbouring states of hosting Daesh cells, while Pakistan and other regional countries urge Kabul to take visible counterterrorism measures. The divergence in tone underscores the deterioration of what little trust had existed between the two governments.

He stated that the matter is further complicated with the shifting regional landscape. India, having reduced its presence after 2021, is re-engaging with Kabul. He noted that the Afghan Foreign Minister's recent visit to India and the revival of diplomatic exchanges signal Afghanistan's intent to use India as a counterbalance to Pakistan and as a reminder to the world that it has strategic options. For New Delhi, this provides a means to reassert influence and hedge against China's growing regional role. Meanwhile, the United States, though militarily withdrawn, has shown renewed interest in Afghanistan's mineral wealth and potential strategic value, adding another layer to the China-US rivalry that increasingly defines the regional chessboard.

Commenting on the internal politics, he informed that the Taliban regime is not monolithic. The power has gradually shifted toward Kandahar-based leadership, sidelining the Haqqani faction that once held sway over key ministries. These internal rivalries have yet to erupt into open conflict, but they complicate governance and may affect how the movement balances domestic stability with external engagement. For Pakistan, the combination of a rigid, unrecognized Taliban government, the resurgence of cross-border militancy, and the encroachment of regional powers poses a multi-dimensional security challenge. With tensions simmering on its eastern border with India and growing volatility to the west, Islamabad risks strategic overextension.

According to him, the way forward requires Pakistan and Afghanistan to fundamentally rethink how they interact. He asserted that the dialogue must move from accusation to communication.

Both countries should institutionalize regular consultations at diplomatic and security levels to prevent crises from escalating. Pakistan must accept that it cannot rely exclusively on one Afghan faction; its policy should be to maintain state-to-state engagement with whichever government controls Kabul, while also cultivating relations with other political, ethnic, and civic actors. He further proposed that a dual-track strategy is essential on the security front. This means that there should be sustained diplomatic pressure on Kabul to deny sanctuary to anti-Pakistan groups which would need to be combined with enhanced domestic counterterrorism capabilities.

He also underlined the importance of rebuilding the human and economic bridge that links ordinary Pakistanis and Afghans. Trade corridors, border markets, and transit routes should be revived under transparent frameworks. He stated that simplified visa regimes for medical patients, students, and traders can restore goodwill among communities that have long viewed Pakistan as a destination for healthcare, education, and livelihood.

Moreover, countering anti-Pakistan sentiment inside Afghanistan also demands consistent public diplomacy—media collaboration, cultural exchanges, and educational scholarships in Pashto and Dari that highlight shared culture rather than geopolitical rivalry. For this purpose, regional cooperation remains indispensable. Pakistan should align its policy with the collective approach emerging in platforms such as the Moscow format, SCO, and OIC, all of which emphasize counterterrorism, women’s education, and economic integration.

He concluded that ultimately, Pakistan’s relationship with Afghanistan must evolve from transactional security management to a principle-based strategy of sovereign engagement. Stability in Afghanistan is no longer a peripheral concern rather it is a direct component of Pakistan’s own internal stability. The Taliban’s consolidation of control without international legitimacy has created a paradox of territorial order and political fragility. Navigating this reality will require Islamabad to combine firmness on security with flexibility in diplomacy and to treat Afghanistan not as a sphere of influence but as an equal neighbour. Only through trust, empathy, and sustained engagement can the two nations escape the cycle of suspicion that has defined their shared history and build a cooperative future grounded in mutual respect and regional peace.

Mr. Aamir Ghauri

Mr. Aamir Ghauri began with a poignant insight on the issue: from his younger days when Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan to decades later, the Afghan conflict still endures. He stated

that the title itself speaks to the heart of our shared struggle: disaster, trauma, distrust, and even hatred between two neighbouring peoples—Afghans and Pakistanis. He stated that this situation was created through decades of political missteps, interference, and mutual suspicion. He reoriented the perspective and stated that instead of viewing the relationship from 1947, when Afghanistan opposed Pakistan's independence, or to the uneasy ties of the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, he stated that reflection should be directed to what occurred after 1979, when Afghanistan was invaded by the Soviet Union. He stated that the single event altered the destiny of the entire region. Under the weight of that war, the Soviet Union collapsed, and Afghanistan, too, was destroyed—dissolving into factionalism, chaos, and endless suffering.

Mr. Ghauri highlighted on the humanitarian aspect of the matter. He stated that since 1979, between two and three million people have lost their lives which includes Afghans, Pakistanis, and others. In addition, millions more were displaced and were forced to find refuge in Germany, Turkey, America, Britain, and Pakistan. They became “eternal refugees,” as people unable to return home. He humanized the issue and made the plight of Afghans analogous to Palestinians and Kashmiris, as people who have also lost their homeland in a war not of their making.

Whilst discussing about the current domestic situation of Afghanistan, Mr. Ghauri stated that it is even more bleak. The Human Rights Watch and other organizations have described worsening conditions under the Taliban rule: mass unemployment, food insecurity, economic collapse, extrajudicial killings, disappearances, torture, and the ruthless oppression of women and girls, who constitute nearly half of the country's 46 million citizens. On the other, Pakistan has also seen its fair share of losses. He stated that hundreds of thousands of Pakistani citizens have died in a war they never wanted to fight. Despite this shared suffering, the people of both nations remain excluded from the conversation. Governments, militants, and foreign powers dominate the narrative, while ordinary Afghans and Pakistanis—those who bear the true burden—are silenced.

Speaking about his experience of working in media, he admitted that the Pakistani media has failed miserably in covering Afghanistan. He stated that the Pakistani journalists did not tell their own stories; instead, they relied on foreign news agencies such as Reuters, AFP, and DPA, reproducing their reports as unquestionable truth. This second-hand reporting stands in stark contrast to his experience of working in other conflict areas such as in Bosnia, Herzegovina, Kosovo, etc., where he was able to report directly from the ground. He stated that even entry

into Gaza and the West Bank was secured yet Afghanistan remained inaccessible. This revealed that there has been always a deep distrust: an unspoken assumption that Pakistani journalists were serving someone else's agenda. This attitude of not treating Kabul as a priority persists today and for KP and Balochistan. He stated that even today, soldiers dying in these regions are often reduced to mere statistics. As Plato once remarked, wars do not decide who is right; they decide who is left.

He also shared his personal experience of growing up in Islamabad at a time when the first wave of Afghan refugees began to arrive in the early 1980s. He stated that the city was transformed economically, socially, and culturally. The so-called "Kalashnikov culture" arose, drugs spread, and local markets were reshaped. Yet amid these changes, Afghan resilience and entrepreneurship also enriched Pakistan's urban life.

To move forward, he proposed that emphasis should be placed on people-to-people engagement rather than government-to-government relations. He concluded that Afghanistan's tragedy is not Afghanistan's alone—it is shared by Pakistan. For more than four decades, both nations have been entangled in wars that were never truly their own. The solution, it was argued, lies not in military might or official declarations but in human connection, empathy, and sustained dialogue. The Afghan conflict must not be seen as an abstract geopolitical issue but as a story of real people—mothers, children, neighbours, and friends—whose lives have been shaped by forces beyond their control.

He emphasized that Pakistan's role should not be limited to commenting on Afghanistan's suffering, but should include efforts to rebuild the bridges that once connected the two peoples. He stated that only through genuine understanding between individuals can distrust be replaced by dignity, and hostility by hope.

Dr. Aamer Raza

Dr. Aamer Raza gave a brief overview about his past initiatives. He stated that he has been actively engaged in several initiatives aimed at fostering dialogue and understanding between Pakistan and Afghanistan, including the Afghan Taliban. Amongst these, the notable one is the "Beyond Boundaries" initiative by the Center for Research and Security Studies (CRSS). Through this platform, he informed that he has moderated numerous sessions involving diverse segments of Afghan society—ranging from government officials, religious scholars (ulama), tribal elders, to trade representatives. These engagements have provided firsthand insights into both official and grassroots narratives surrounding the bilateral relationship.

Moreover, in his forthcoming book which analyses the Afghan Taliban and state-building dynamics, *The Emperors of the Graveyard: Demystifying the Afghan Taliban and Understanding the State they are Building*, he had conducted extensive field research in Afghanistan, including multiple visits and meetings with high-ranking Taliban figures. These engagements offered rare perspectives on the evolving political dynamics within Afghanistan since the Taliban's return to power.

During his discussion, he touched upon three facets of the issue which included why anti-Pakistan sentiment runs so deep in Afghanistan, what are the issues of Afghan government with Pakistan and vice versa. For the anti-Pakistan sentiment, he stated that the roots of this hostility are multifaceted and stretch back to the creation of Pakistan itself. He stated that issues like the Durand Line remain emotionally charged, despite ambiguity even amongst Afghan nationalists about its precise implications. Moreover, the narrative within Afghanistan often portrays Pakistan as the primary actor behind both the Taliban's rise and the country's broader instability. This perception is widespread and spans across ideological divides—from Afghan nationalists who see Pakistan as an external manipulator to Islamist factions who blame Pakistan for undermining the Taliban during the US occupation.

He highlighted the difference of coverage in Pakistani and Afghani media. He informed the audience that whilst the Pakistani media does not cover about the internal domestic The prevalence of anti-Pakistan rhetoric in Afghan media has created an environment where constructive discourse is difficult. Any Afghan voices advocating for improved ties with Pakistan are often marginalized and branded as traitorous. This emotional, reactionary framing has stifled debate on key bilateral issues, particularly Afghanistan's foreign policy.

He stated that tensions have also been exacerbated by recent developments, such as Pakistan's repatriation of Afghan refugees. The Afghan officials have dubiously framed the deportation as Pakistan sending ISKP to infiltrate in guise of refugees. This claim has not only framed the deportation as a national security issue but also has given the impression to its public that they have a functional government.

Trade and visa issues remain additional flashpoints. Pakistani officials cite concerns over contraband—such as drugs and weapons—as reasons for heightened border checks, which in turn delay perishable Afghan exports. Afghan traders, however, view these delays as a deliberate tactic by Pakistan to exert pressure. Visa restrictions further compound tensions,

particularly given Afghanistan's limited healthcare infrastructure, which forces many Afghans to seek treatment in Pakistan.

From Pakistan's perspective, the most pressing concern is the continued presence and operations of the TTP from within Afghan territory. Despite Taliban assurances of containing the group, attacks in Pakistan have persisted. Afghan officials, for their part, suggest that a forceful crackdown on the TTP risks splintering their own ranks, as many lower-level fighters view jihad as a global mission rather than a purely national struggle. This ideological tension has already led to defections to ISKP and complicates any serious effort by the Taliban leadership to rein in the TTP.

In sum, Pakistan-Afghanistan relations remain mired in mutual suspicion, historical grievances, and strategic miscalculations. While dialogue continues at various levels, the path forward will require both sides to overcome deeply embedded narratives and to prioritize long-term regional stability over short-term political gains.

Analysis

Lt. Gen. (R) Bilal Akbar presented a comprehensive and pragmatic analysis of the Pakistan-Afghanistan relationship, emphasizing its deep security and geopolitical complexities. His perspective was rooted in strategic realism, identifying Pakistan's core security challenge as the collusion between the Tehrik-i-Taliban Afghanistan (TTA) and various militant entities, including the TTP, IS-Khorasan, and Baloch insurgent groups such as the BLA and BRA. He noted that these groups exploit ungoverned border regions and are sustained by sophisticated weaponry left behind by departing U.S. forces. This situation, he explained, has been worsened by Kabul's reported demand for a financial package to relocate TTP fighters, reflecting the transactional nature of Taliban cooperation. Lt. Gen. Akbar also warned of ideological ambitions within the Afghan Taliban leadership, where some elements may still nurture a "greater Emirate" vision.

Expanding beyond immediate security concerns, he linked Afghanistan's internal dynamics to wider global developments, noting that any escalation of the Russia-Ukraine conflict could renew the strategic relevance of Afghanistan's geography, especially assets such as the Bagram airbase. Such a development, he argued, could allow the Taliban to attract international aid and further consolidate their control. On India's role, he observed that New Delhi's policy of engaging with whoever governs Kabul has enabled it to regain influence, while Pakistan's sway has diminished. Given that nuclear and conventional deterrence limit direct conflict between

India and Pakistan, he contended that India now operates in the subconventional domain, supporting anti-Pakistan proxies tolerated by the Afghan regime. He added that Pakistan's handling of Afghan refugees has been interpreted by Afghans as a coercive strategy, deepening anti-Pakistan sentiment. In conclusion, he argued that there are no quick fixes in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. The path forward, he said, must be based on patient engagement with all Afghan factions, adherence to non-interference, and a government-led, multi-pronged policy aimed at building lasting friendship and regional stability.

Mr. Mansoor Ahmad Khan approached the issue through a diplomatic and historical lens, offering insight into the evolving political landscape following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. He recalled the uncertainty in early 2021, when Pakistan feared that a Taliban takeover could destabilize the region as it had in the 1990s. Analysts at the time were divided between expecting renewed chaos or cautious stability. Four years later, he argued, Afghanistan has entered a third scenario: the Taliban have consolidated control for the first time since 1979 but remain unrecognized internationally and politically rigid. While they have restored a degree of order, they have failed to establish a constitutional framework, restricted education for women, and shown little interest in inclusivity or reform. However, they have succeeded in securing limited regional legitimacy by engaging with Russia, China, Iran, and Central Asian states through the Moscow and SCO processes.

Mr. Khan emphasized that despite these shifts, Pakistan and Afghanistan have not overcome their historical mistrust. He traced this distrust back to the disputes over the Durand Line and the Pashtunistan issue, through decades of fluctuating cooperation and hostility. He noted the irony that each side now echoes the other's past grievances: where Kabul once accused Islamabad of sheltering the Afghan Taliban, Islamabad now blames Kabul for harbouring the TTP. The heart of current tensions, he explained, lies in cross-border terrorism, with militant groups conducting attacks from Afghan territory while the Taliban claim they cannot act without risking defections to ISKP. He observed that diplomatic rhetoric has hardened, as Afghan officials deny the presence of terrorists on their soil and accuse Pakistan of hosting Daesh elements.

He also discussed the regional power balance, noting India's re-engagement with the Taliban as part of its strategy to reassert influence and hedge against China, while the US shows renewed interest in Afghanistan's resources amid its competition with Beijing. Internally, he noted the Taliban's evolving power structure, with Kandahar-based leaders sidelining the Haqqani network, a shift that could create future instability. For Pakistan, he warned, the

combination of an unrecognized Taliban regime, resurging cross-border militancy, and regional competition risks overextending its strategic capacity. He proposed that Pakistan and Afghanistan move from accusation to structured communication, institutionalizing dialogue through regular diplomatic and security consultations. He stressed that Pakistan must not rely on one Afghan faction but engage the Afghan state as a whole while strengthening its domestic counterterrorism framework. Rebuilding people-to-people ties through trade, education, and cultural exchange, he said, is equally vital. Ultimately, he argued that Pakistan's relationship with Afghanistan must evolve from tactical management to a principle-based approach that treats Afghanistan as an equal sovereign neighbor and builds trust through consistent, empathetic diplomacy.

Mr. Aamir Ghauri adopted a humanistic and media-oriented perspective, grounding his reflections in decades of personal experience observing the Afghan conflict. He described the situation as a shared tragedy defined by trauma, distrust, and the long shadow of mutual interference. Instead of starting the historical narrative at Pakistan's independence in 1947, he redirected attention to 1979, when the Soviet invasion reshaped the region's destiny. The ensuing decades, he stated, witnessed immense human suffering: millions of lives lost and millions more displaced. He compared the plight of Afghans to that of Palestinians and Kashmiris—peoples deprived of homeland and peace by forces beyond their control.

He portrayed Afghanistan's current state as one of deep humanitarian crisis—marked by unemployment, food shortages, and the systemic oppression of women—while emphasizing that Pakistan, too, has borne immense losses from wars it did not choose. He lamented that ordinary citizens remain voiceless, overshadowed by governments, militants, and foreign powers. Drawing from his journalism career, he offered a candid critique of Pakistan's media, which he said had failed to develop its own narratives about Afghanistan, instead relying on Western agencies such as Reuters and AFP. This dependency, he argued, has created a distorted understanding of the Afghan conflict. He contrasted this with his experiences covering wars in the Balkans and the Middle East, where he could report directly from the field—access that was never granted in Afghanistan due to deep mutual distrust. He recalled witnessing the arrival of Afghan refugees in Islamabad in the 1980s, noting how they transformed the city socially and economically while also introducing challenges such as drug trade and armed culture. Yet, he acknowledged, Afghan resilience also enriched Pakistani society. Ghauri concluded that future peace lies not in state policies or military strategies but in human connection and

empathy. He argued that genuine understanding between ordinary people, rather than official diplomacy, is the only path to replacing distrust with dignity and hostility with hope.

Dr. Aamer Raza provided a scholarly and dialogue-based perspective, drawing on his extensive experience moderating cross-border initiatives and conducting field research in Afghanistan. He discussed his involvement in the “Beyond Boundaries” initiative of the Center for Research and Security Studies, through which he facilitated engagement between Afghan officials, clerics, elders, and traders. His research, also reflected in his forthcoming book *The Emperors of the Graveyard*, explores the internal dynamics of the Taliban and the evolving nature of Afghan state-building. He examined three dimensions of the bilateral strain: the roots of anti-Pakistan sentiment in Afghanistan, the grievances of the Afghan government against Pakistan, and Pakistan’s concerns about Kabul’s policies.

Dr. Raza traced Afghan hostility toward Pakistan to historical grievances and emotionally charged issues like the Durand Line. He explained that many Afghans—both nationalists and Islamists—perceive Pakistan as a manipulative power responsible for Afghanistan’s instability and for enabling the Taliban’s rise. He contrasted the underreporting of Afghan issues in Pakistani media with the anti-Pakistan rhetoric dominating Afghan outlets, noting that any Afghan advocating improved relations risks being branded a traitor. He highlighted how recent controversies, such as the repatriation of refugees, have been weaponized by Afghan officials to frame Pakistan negatively, even suggesting that deportations are a cover for infiltrating ISKP operatives. Trade and visa restrictions, he observed, have deepened mistrust, with Afghan traders viewing Pakistani regulations as deliberate pressure tactics.

From Pakistan’s perspective, he said, the most pressing concern remains the continued operation of the TTP from within Afghanistan. Despite Taliban assurances, attacks persist, and Kabul’s reluctance to act is explained by both ideological sympathy and internal fragility. Many lower-level Taliban fighters see jihad as global, not national, which makes suppressing the TTP risky and potentially divisive. Raza concluded that relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan remain trapped in historical grievances and cyclical mistrust. He argued that while dialogue continues, it often fails to challenge entrenched narratives. For genuine progress, both sides must prioritize long-term stability and mutual respect over short-term politics. He emphasized that peace will require overcoming emotional nationalism and investing in sustained, inclusive dialogue that acknowledges shared history while fostering trust and cooperation.

Together, the four speakers presented a comprehensive, multidimensional understanding of the Pakistan-Afghanistan relationship. Lt. Gen. (R) Bilal Akbar grounded his analysis in national security and strategy, calling for patient engagement; Mr. Mansoor Ahmad Khan approached the issue through diplomacy and regional realignment, urging institutionalized dialogue; Mr. Aamir Ghauri focused on the human and moral costs of conflict, highlighting empathy and grassroots connection; and Dr. Aamer Raza examined the psychological and narrative dimensions of mistrust, advocating for intellectual and civic engagement. Collectively, their perspectives revealed that while security and strategy remain vital, lasting peace between Pakistan and Afghanistan will depend on empathy, communication, and the rebuilding of trust at both the state and societal levels.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the collective insights of the four speakers illuminate the Pakistan-Afghanistan relationship as one defined by overlapping layers of history, security, ideology, and human experience. Lt. Gen. (R) Bilal Akbar's strategic assessment underscores that Pakistan's foremost challenge lies in managing militant threats emerging from Afghan soil while pursuing a policy of engagement and non-interference. Mr. Mansoor Ahmad Khan's diplomatic perspective reinforces the need for structured communication, pragmatic state-to-state relations, and regional cooperation as essential tools for stability. Mr. Aamir Ghauri's deeply human narrative reminds both nations that beneath geopolitical rivalry lies a shared suffering that can only be healed through empathy, understanding, and people-to-people connection. Finally, Dr. Aamer Raza's analytical approach exposes the deep-seated mistrust and divergent narratives that continue to obstruct meaningful reconciliation.

Together, their analyses converge on a single truth: Pakistan and Afghanistan are bound by geography, history, and humanity. Their destinies are intertwined, and neither can achieve lasting peace or prosperity without the other. The path forward demands patience, mutual respect, and sustained engagement—anchored not only in strategic calculation but also in moral responsibility. Building a future free from suspicion and hostility will require both nations to transcend old narratives, prioritize dialogue over dominance, and replace the politics of blame with the pursuit of trust. Only then can the region move toward a stable, cooperative, and peaceful future.

Policy Recommendations:

1. **Institutional Alignment:** Establishment of an Afghan Policy Cell at the federal level, headed by a senior parliamentarian, with representation from the KP and Balochistan provincial assemblies.
2. **Security Operations:** Security forces must wholeheartedly upscale the fight against terrorism along the border and in the hinterlands of KP and Balochistan, prioritizing proactive prevention operations.
3. **Public Engagement:** Comprehensive engagement, co-option, and compensation for the public in operational areas to mitigate the stresses on their lives and property.
4. **Refugee Repatriation:** Handle the Afghan refugee issue with empathy and support, pursuing repatriation through a mutually agreed, phased program with the Afghan government.
5. **Cultural and Media Exchange:** Establish bilateral media correspondents with Afghan journalists in Islamabad and Pakistani journalists in Kabul. Moreover, shared programming on television and digital platforms should be encouraged which highlight the ordinary lives rather than political statements.
6. **Social Media Initiatives:** Through digital storytelling, Afghan-Pakistani interdependence can be shown, especially through the voices of Afghans born and raised in Pakistan since the 1980s.
7. **Legal Recognition and Citizenship:** Pakistan could consider granting nationality or legal residency to Afghans born on its soil. Similar to second- or third-generation Pakistanis living in Britain or America, this step would require them to have visas to enter Afghanistan. This can potentially formalize their status and integrate them into Pakistan's economy.
8. **Cultural Diplomacy:** Launch joint film, music, and sports festivals to humanize each other once again. In this regard, student exchange programs could help both nations rediscover their shared history.
9. **Empowering Women:** By connecting Afghan and Pakistani women a long-term peace constituency could be created.
10. **Language and Education:** Pakistan should teach regional languages in its schools as language breaks barriers and builds empathy.

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Brief Bios of the NIPP Team

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Dean NIPP. Earlier, he served in the public sector in various departments for more than three decades. He did his master's and PhD from King's College London, UK. He is the author of several books and taught national security, public policy, and foreign policy of Pakistan at various universities.

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Director (Publication) at NIPP. She is a senior bureaucrat from 26th CTP. She has more than 20 years' experience in diverse fields. She has done Master's in International Trade Law and Economics from Switzerland and LLM from Ireland. She has served in Federal Ministries and as head of attached organizations in Federal Government. She has been on board of SOEs and has served as CEO of SOEs. She has hands on experience of critical subjects like sugar, fertilizers and prices of essential commodities.

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Ms. Sadia Pirzada

Ms. Pirzada joined civil service in 2019 in Office Management Group. She has worked in the Ministry of Finance and dealt with international development partners and multilaterals. Most notably she was Section Officer (EF-IFR) where she was the desk officer for IMF program loans and responsible for examining and implementing the policies under the IMF program. She was also Section Officer to Special Secretary Finance (SSF) wherein she provided policy input and assistance to SSF on issues concerning the finances of the Federal Government.

Brief Bios of the Panellists



Lt. Gen. (R) Bilal Akbar

Lt. Gen. (R) Bilal Akbar is a retired three-star general of the Pakistan Army. He previously served as Chief of General Staff, Pakistan Army. During his service, he worked in the capacity of Director General, Sindh Rangers and Chairman Pakistan Ordnance Factory. After retirement, he served as Pakistan's ambassador to Saudi Arabia.



Mr. Mansoor Ahmad Khan

Mr. Mansoor Ahmad Khan, a distinguished Pakistani diplomat, joined the Foreign Service in 1992 after earning a Master's in Diplomatic Studies. He served as Ambassador to Austria and Pakistan's Permanent Representative to the UN in Vienna (2018-2020), and Ambassador to Afghanistan (2020-2022). Awarded Sitara-e- Shujaat in 2023, he now directs BNU's Center for Policy Research.



Mr. Aamir Ghauri

Mr. Aamir Ghauri is the Resident Editor of The News International in Islamabad since December 2017. He founded the South Asia Future Forum (SAFF) in London in 2016, engaging experts on South Asia's issues. Previously, he worked as Political Editor and Program Host for ARY News, covering stories globally. He launched and edited 'The Asian Journal' in London in 2009 and joined Dunya TV as Director of News & Current Affairs in 2008. Ghauri led Geo TV's European news operations and has extensive experience with Pakistani and international media, including the BBC. He holds an MSc in International Politics from SOAS, University of London, and has practised law in Pakistan. Ghauri is a respected political commentator and author of 'The Divine Destruction', a commentary on the 2005 South Asian earthquake.



Dr. Aamer Raza, Assistant Professor

Dr. Aamer Raza is a political scientist with specialization in preventing/countering violent extremism, counterterrorism, and multilateral security cooperation. He has an extensive experience in teaching, research, and academic administration with over 20 peer-

reviewed publications. He is also an author of an upcoming book with Vanguard Publishers (2025) which analyzes the Afghan Taliban and state-building dynamics. The book's title is *The Emperors of the Graveyard: Demystifying the Afghan Taliban and Understanding the State they are Building*.

Glimpses from the Roundtable Discussion



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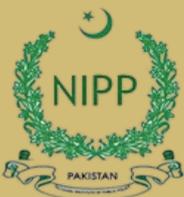
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