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The Afghanistan-Pakistan Escalation of 2025 : Regional Security Complex Theory and Sub-Regional Insecurity

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Abstract

The escalation of tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan during 2025 represents a critical episode in South Asian security, revealing how state fragility, transnational militant networks, and contested borders generate recurring instability. This article applies Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) to explain why Afghanistan and Pakistan constitute a tightly coupled sub-regional security complex characterized by high security interdependence and persistent mutual securitization. Using a qualitative, theory-driven research design drawing on institutional reports, conflict-event data, and policy-oriented literature, the study demonstrates that the 2025 escalation was structurally shaped by enduring historical enmity, the operational autonomy of non-state armed groups, and altered patterns of external power penetration following the United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan. The findings show that bilateral crisis management and ad hoc confidence-building measures are insufficient in contexts of entrenched regional insecurity. This article argues that the Afghanistan-Pakistan conflict constitutes an autonomous sub-regional security complex in which non-state armed groups function as structural drivers of insecurity rather than merely episodic triggers of violence.

Keywords: Afghanistan-Pakistan conflict; Regional Security Complex Theory; sub-regional security; non-state armed groups; border governance.

Introduction

The Afghanistan–Pakistan relationship has long represented one of the most persistent and volatile sources of insecurity in South Asia. Since the Taliban’s return to power in Afghanistan in August 2021, security conditions along the Afghanistan–Pakistan frontier have deteriorated significantly. Pakistan has experienced a sharp increase in militant violence, particularly from Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which has emerged as one of the most active insurgent groups in the region. According to the Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (PICSS), terrorist incidents and related fatalities increased substantially between 2022 and 2024, making 2024 one of the deadliest years for Pakistan since the peak of militancy in the mid-2010s (PICSS, 2024). Similarly, reports by the United Nations Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team identified the continued presence of thousands of TTP fighters and affiliated networks operating from Afghan territory, raising concerns regarding cross-border militancy and regional stability (United Nations Security Council, 2024). Conflict-event data compiled by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) also indicate a rising trend of militant attacks, border incidents, and

security-force casualties in the Afghanistan–Pakistan borderlands following the Taliban’s takeover (ACLED, 2024).

The deterioration of security conditions culminated in a series of confrontations throughout 2025. Pakistani authorities repeatedly accused Afghanistan-based militant groups of launching attacks against security forces and civilian targets within Pakistan, while the Taliban administration rejected these allegations and criticized Pakistan’s retaliatory military operations as violations of Afghan sovereignty. Border closures, military responses, and restrictions on cross-border movement further intensified tensions between the two countries. Beyond military implications, these developments disrupted regional trade, humanitarian access, and local livelihoods in border communities, demonstrating how localized security incidents can rapidly evolve into broader regional crises.

Scholarly analyses have traditionally explained Afghanistan–Pakistan tensions through historical, geopolitical, and strategic perspectives. A substantial body of literature identifies the Durand Line dispute as the central source of bilateral friction, emphasizing contested sovereignty, ethnic divisions, and

competing territorial claims (Barfield, 2010; Rubin, 2013). Other scholars highlight Pakistan's pursuit of strategic depth in Afghanistan and its broader security competition with India as key factors shaping Islamabad's regional behavior (Rashid, 2010; Nawaz, 2018; Abbas, 2014). Meanwhile, studies on militancy and insurgency focus on the operational activities of non-state armed groups, including TTP, the Haqqani Network, Al-Qaeda, and Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISIS-K), emphasizing their role in sustaining instability across the borderlands (Felbab-Brown, 2022; Giustozzi, 2022).

Although these studies provide valuable empirical insights, they exhibit several analytical limitations. First, much of the existing literature remains state-centric and bilateral in orientation, treating insecurity as the outcome of specific policy choices, leadership preferences, or isolated strategic calculations. Second, regional security studies on South Asia often prioritize the India-Pakistan rivalry, relegating Afghanistan-Pakistan dynamics to a secondary position within broader geopolitical narratives (Cohen, 2004; Fair, 2014). Third, studies focusing on militant organizations frequently analyze non-state actors at the organizational level without

adequately situating them within wider regional security structures. Consequently, existing scholarship struggles to explain why patterns of mistrust, cross-border violence, and mutual threat perceptions continue to persist despite changes in governments, diplomatic initiatives, and external interventions.

This limitation points to a deeper conceptual problem. Afghanistan and Pakistan do not operate in isolation. Their security environments are interconnected through cross-border militancy, refugee movements, informal economic networks, ethnic linkages, and competing sovereignty claims. Security developments in one country frequently generate direct consequences for the other, creating a cycle of mutual insecurity that transcends conventional bilateral explanations. Understanding these dynamics requires an analytical framework capable of capturing both regional interdependence and the structural factors that reproduce insecurity over time (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Collins, 2020).

This article argues that the Afghanistan-Pakistan conflict is best understood through Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver (Buzan, 1991; Buzan & Wæver, 2003). RSCT posits that

security threats are clustered geographically and that states located within the same region tend to develop patterns of security interdependence that cannot be adequately analyzed in isolation. Rather than focusing exclusively on state behavior, RSCT highlights how patterns of amity and enmity, securitization processes, and external power penetration shape regional security dynamics. Within this framework, Afghanistan and Pakistan constitute a tightly coupled sub-regional security complex characterized by persistent mutual securitization, recurring border crises, and the significant influence of non-state armed actors.

The 2025 escalation provides an important empirical case for examining these dynamics. Intensified attacks attributed to Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), retaliatory cross-border military operations, deteriorating border governance, and changing patterns of external involvement following the withdrawal of the United States reveal how structural vulnerabilities contribute to conflict escalation (SIPRI, 2024). Viewed through the lens of Regional Security Complex Theory, the 2025 crisis reflects the reproduction of an enduring sub-regional security complex characterized by persistent security interdependence, mutual

securitization, and the continued influence of non-state armed actors, rather than an isolated security incident.

Importantly, the 2025 escalation represented not only a quantitative increase in violence but also a qualitative transformation in the character of regional security interaction. Whereas earlier confrontations were largely confined to localized border clashes and counterterrorism operations, the later stages of the 2025 crisis increasingly involved direct military engagement between Pakistan and the Taliban-led authorities, accompanied by broader economic and political coercive measures. These developments suggest that the escalation should be understood not merely as an intensification of earlier tensions, but as a qualitative transformation in the patterns of regional security interaction within the Afghanistan–Pakistan sub-regional security complex.

Beyond its relevance to South Asian security studies, the Afghanistan–Pakistan case also contributes to broader debates concerning regional insecurity, state fragility, and transnational militancy. The interaction between weak governance, contested borders, and non-state armed groups demonstrates how localized insecurity can generate wider regional and

international consequences (Acharya, 2014; Collins, 2020). As contemporary security challenges increasingly transcend national boundaries, understanding the structural foundations of regional insecurity becomes essential for both scholars and policymakers seeking sustainable approaches to conflict prevention and regional stability.

Despite growing scholarly attention to Afghanistan–Pakistan relations, limited research has systematically examined the 2025 escalation through the analytical lens of Regional Security Complex Theory. Existing studies largely emphasize historical grievances, strategic competition, or militant activities in isolation, leaving the interaction between regional security structures and conflict escalation insufficiently explored. More importantly, limited attention has been devoted to how the Taliban's institutional transformation following its return to power reshaped patterns of regional security interaction between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Consequently, existing scholarship has yet to fully explain why the 2025 escalation differed not only in its intensity but also in the changing patterns of regional security interaction that distinguished it from previous cycles of border violence. This gap provides the basis for the present study.

Accordingly, this study addresses the following research question: How does Regional Security Complex Theory explain the persistence and escalation of the Afghanistan–Pakistan conflict, particularly during the 2025 crisis, and what does this reveal about the structure of sub-regional security in South Asia?

To answer this question, the article employs a qualitative, theory-driven research design drawing upon conflict-event data, institutional reports, policy assessments, and academic literature covering developments between 2019 and 2025. By combining empirical evidence with RSCT, the study seeks to identify both the immediate triggers and the deeper structural conditions that sustain insecurity within the Afghanistan–Pakistan sub-regional security complex.

This study makes three principal contributions. First, it applies RSCT specifically to the Afghanistan–Pakistan sub-regional security complex, challenging the tendency to subsume Afghan security dynamics under the broader India–Pakistan rivalry. Second, it extends the application of Regional Security Complex Theory by demonstrating how the institutional transformation of the Taliban from an insurgent movement into a de facto governing authority reshaped patterns of

regional security interaction, while reinforcing the structural role of non-state armed actors in sustaining regional insecurity. Third, it contributes to broader debates on regional security by illustrating how sub-regional security complexes continue to shape conflict dynamics in the post-intervention era. In doing so, the article advances a more comprehensive understanding of how regional security structures constrain bilateral diplomacy and influence the prospects for sustainable stability.

The novelty of this study lies in three interrelated aspects. First, it conceptualizes Afghanistan–Pakistan relations as an autonomous sub-regional security complex rather than treating them as a secondary dimension of the broader India–Pakistan rivalry. Second, rather than treating the Taliban solely as a non-state armed actor, this study demonstrates how its institutional transformation into a de facto governing authority altered the dynamics of regional security interaction within the Afghanistan–Pakistan sub-regional security complex. Third, it demonstrates that the 2025 escalation represented a qualitative transformation in the security dynamics of the Afghanistan–Pakistan sub-regional security complex, shifting beyond localized border

confrontations toward broader interstate security interaction under post-withdrawal regional conditions.

Literature Review

Scholarly discussions on Afghanistan–Pakistan relations span multiple disciplines, including history, security studies, political science, and conflict analysis. Despite this extensive body of work, a persistent analytical gap remains: existing studies often fail to explain why patterns of mistrust, cross-border violence, and strategic rivalry endure across different political regimes, external interventions, and shifting domestic conditions. This literature review maps four major strands of scholarship to demonstrate both the strengths and limitations of existing research, thereby situating this study’s contribution within broader academic debates.

Historical and Geopolitical Approaches to Afghanistan–Pakistan Relations

Early and influential scholarship on Afghanistan–Pakistan relations is dominated by historical and geopolitical analyses. Scholars such as Barnett R. Rubin, Thomas Barfield, and Ludwig W. Adamec identify the Durand Line dispute as the central structural fault line shaping

bilateral relations. Afghanistan's long-standing refusal to recognize the Durand Line as an international boundary is closely tied to Pashtun ethnonational identity, with Pashtun communities divided across both sides of the border. This identity dimension renders the dispute highly resistant to diplomatic resolution and contributes to its persistence.

Another significant body of work focuses on Pakistan's strategic depth doctrine. Authors including Ahmed Rashid and Hassan Abbas argue that Pakistan's engagement with Afghan armed groups, from mujahideen factions in the 1980s to the Taliban in the 1990s and selective actors after 2001, reflects a deeply embedded strategic culture rather than ad hoc policy decisions. From this perspective, Afghanistan is viewed primarily through the lens of Pakistan's rivalry with India, reinforcing interventionist behavior.

While these historical studies provide rich empirical detail, they remain analytically limited in two respects. First, they tend to adopt a bilateral and state-centric lens, underestimating the regional structures that shape security behavior. Second, they struggle to explain why antagonistic patterns persist despite leadership changes, peace initiatives, and shifts in external power involvement. These

limitations point to the need for a framework capable of capturing structural continuity beyond historical grievances alone.

South Asian Regional Security Literature

A second strand of literature examines Afghanistan-Pakistan relations within the broader context of South Asian security. This literature expanded significantly following the 1998 India-Pakistan nuclear tests, with scholars such as Stephen P. Cohen, C. Christine Fair, and S. Paul Kapur focusing on deterrence stability, proxy warfare, and strategic competition.

However, most regional security analyses remain India-centric, treating Afghanistan as either a peripheral theater of India-Pakistan rivalry or a strategic buffer zone. Afghanistan's security dynamics are often subsumed under larger regional narratives, obscuring its autonomous role in shaping sub-regional insecurity. Alternative perspectives that situate Afghanistan within Central Asia emphasize cultural and economic ties to the north but underestimate the intensity of Afghanistan's security interdependence with Pakistan.

The primary limitation of this literature lies in its lack of sub-regional analytical precision. By focusing on South Asia as a single security unit, these studies overlook the existence of sub-regional security complexes with distinct actors, threat patterns, and logics. As a result, Afghanistan-Pakistan dynamics are inadequately theorized, reinforcing the need for a framework such as RSCT that can systematically analyze sub-regional security interdependence.

Non-State Actors and Cross-Border Militancy

A third body of scholarship focuses on non-state armed groups operating in the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands. Scholars such as Antonio Giustozzi, Vanda Felbab-Brown, Hassan Abbas, and Graeme Smith provide detailed analyses of groups including the Afghan Taliban, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the Haqqani Network, Al-Qaeda, and Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISIS-K).

This literature offers valuable insights into organizational structures, ideological narratives, recruitment strategies, and cross-border mobility. Recent studies further demonstrate that the resurgence of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) following the Taliban's return to

power has significantly altered regional security dynamics and increased pressure on Pakistani counterterrorism policies (Giustozzi, 2022; Felbab-Brown, 2022). It also highlights how refugee flows, informal economies, and weak border governance facilitate militant resilience. Nevertheless, two key limitations persist. First, studies are often fragmented at the micro-level, focusing on individual groups or localized areas without situating them within broader regional security structures. Second, most analyses remain empirically rich but theoretically thin, describing the consequences of militancy without integrating them into regional-level security theories.

More recent scholarship has also documented the Taliban's transition from an insurgent movement to a de facto governing authority following its return to power in 2021. Existing studies have examined this transformation primarily from the perspectives of governance, state-building, and counterterrorism, emphasizing institutional consolidation, security-sector reorganization, and the exercise of political authority. However, relatively limited attention has been devoted to the implications of this institutional transformation for patterns of regional security interaction between

Afghanistan and Pakistan. Consequently, the relationship between Taliban state formation and the evolution of sub-regional security dynamics remains insufficiently theorized.

As a result, while non-state actors are recognized as critical drivers of insecurity, their structural role in sustaining regional instability remains under-theorized. This gap underscores the value of RSCT as a framework capable of incorporating non-state actors into a systemic understanding of regional insecurity.

Applications of Regional Security Complex Theory

Developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, Regional Security Complex Theory conceptualizes regions as clusters of states whose security concerns are so interlinked that they cannot reasonably be analyzed in isolation. In *Regions and Powers* (2003), Buzan and Wæver argue that security threats are more likely to travel over short distances, producing enduring patterns of amity, enmity, and securitization.

RSCT has been widely applied to regions such as the Middle East, East Asia, Europe, and Sub-Saharan Africa. More

recent scholarship has reaffirmed the continued relevance of Regional Security Complex Theory in explaining contemporary regional security interactions, particularly in environments characterized by transnational threats and complex patterns of security interdependence (Collins, 2020). However, its application to South Asia remains limited and uneven. Existing studies often treat South Asia as a single regional security complex dominated by India-Pakistan rivalry, leaving little analytical space for examining sub-regional dynamics such as Afghanistan-Pakistan relations.

Moreover, previous RSCT-based analyses of Afghanistan tend to emphasize great-power intervention or Afghanistan's role as a buffer state, rather than focusing on its structural interdependence with Pakistan. Consequently, the Afghanistan-Pakistan dyad remains under-theorized within RSCT scholarship, particularly with regard to the role of non-state actors.

Synthesis of the Literature Review

Taken together, existing scholarship provides substantial empirical insight into Afghanistan–Pakistan relations but remains limited in its explanatory capacity. Historical and geopolitical approaches successfully identify the origins of conflict,

including the Durand Line dispute and Pakistan's strategic depth doctrine, yet they struggle to explain why insecurity persists despite changing governments, diplomatic initiatives, and shifts in external intervention. Regional security studies illuminate broader South Asian power dynamics but often subsume Afghanistan–Pakistan interactions within the India–Pakistan rivalry, thereby obscuring the autonomous security logic of the borderlands. Research on non-state armed actors offers detailed accounts of militant organizations but frequently treats these actors as isolated security challenges rather than as components of a wider regional security structure.

These limitations are not merely empirical but theoretical. Existing approaches explain important dimensions of the conflict but do not adequately account for how historical grievances, state behavior, and transnational militancy interact to reproduce insecurity over time. Furthermore, existing scholarship has yet to systematically explain how the Taliban's institutional transformation has altered patterns of regional security interaction and contributed to the changing character of the Afghanistan–Pakistan conflict following 2021. Regional Security Complex Theory offers a more comprehensive framework

because it connects these elements within a single analytical structure based on security interdependence, mutual securitization, and regional threat diffusion. Accordingly, this study applies RSCT to explain why Afghanistan–Pakistan insecurity persists across different political contexts and why the 2025 escalation represents the manifestation of enduring structural dynamics rather than an isolated bilateral crisis.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) as its primary analytical framework to explain the persistence and escalation of the Afghanistan–Pakistan conflict. In this article, the term sub-regional security complex refers to a nested security complex that exhibits autonomous and persistent patterns of securitization within a broader regional security system. RSCT provides a structural lens for understanding how security threats are regionally clustered, how patterns of amity and enmity shape long-term interactions, and how both state and non-state actors contribute to regional insecurity.

Afghanistan–Pakistan as a Sub-Regional Security Complex

RSCT defines a regional security complex as a group of states whose primary security concerns are sufficiently interlinked that they cannot be analyzed independently. Afghanistan and Pakistan constitute a distinct sub-regional security complex due to their geographical proximity, contested border, historical grievances, and dense cross-border social and militant networks.

This sub-regional security complex is characterized by persistent insecurity along the Durand Line, repeated cross-border military actions, and the operational presence of armed non-state actors. Importantly, Afghanistan-Pakistan security dynamics exhibit a degree of autonomy from the broader India-Pakistan rivalry and Central Asian security interactions, illustrating RSCT's concept of sub-regional security complexes.

Core Analytical Concepts

1. Patterns of Amity and Enmity

Patterns of amity and enmity refer to durable relationships of friendship or hostility that shape regional security behavior. In the Afghanistan-Pakistan sub-complex, enmity is deeply entrenched, driven by unresolved territorial disputes, historical intervention, and competing sovereignty claims. Periods of tactical

cooperation, such as Pakistan's support for the Taliban, have not translated into durable trust, indicating that structural enmity overrides short-term alignment.

2. Security Interdependence

Security interdependence describes the extent to which insecurity in one state directly affects others. In this sub-complex, interdependence manifests across multiple dimensions: military (border clashes and airstrikes), political (interference in domestic affairs), economic (trade disruption and smuggling), and societal (ethnic and tribal linkages). The 2025 escalation illustrates how these interdependencies transform localized incidents into broader crises.

3. Securitization and Mutual Threat Construction

Drawing on the Copenhagen School, particularly Wæver's concept of securitization (Wæver, 1995), RSCT incorporates securitization as a process through which actors frame issues as existential threats. Pakistan securitizes Afghanistan primarily as a source of militant violence, particularly from TTP. Conversely, the Taliban-led Afghan government securitizes Pakistan as a violator of sovereignty through cross-

border operations. This mutual securitization legitimizes extraordinary measures and inhibits desecuritization.

4. External Power Penetration

External power penetration refers to the involvement of actors outside the region in shaping security dynamics. Historically, Afghanistan-Pakistan security has been influenced by the Soviet Union, the United States, China, India, Iran, and Russia. The withdrawal of the United States reduced external constraints on regional actors, intensifying structural instability and enabling the 2025 escalation.

Integrating Non-State Actors into RSCT

While RSCT was initially state-centric, this study treats non-state armed groups as structural components of the regional security complex. Organizations such as TTP and ISIS-K exploit porous borders, weak governance, and identity linkages, embedding themselves within regional security dynamics. Their actions not only trigger crises but also reinforce mutual securitization between states. The analysis further recognizes that the Taliban's institutional transformation following its return to power has altered patterns of regional security interaction between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Rather

than replacing RSCT's state-centered foundations, this transformation is examined as an empirical development that reinforces the explanatory value of regional security interdependence and mutual securitization.

Complementary Perspectives

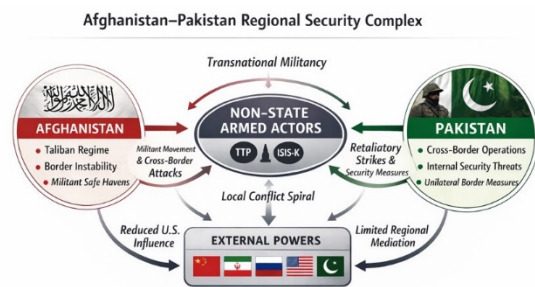
To enrich analysis, this study draws selectively on realism and constructivism. Structural realism helps explain power asymmetry and security dilemmas, while constructivism elucidates the role of identity, legitimacy, and historical narratives. However, RSCT remains central due to its capacity to integrate material, ideational, and regional factors within a unified framework.

Analytical Expectations

By applying RSCT, this study expects to demonstrate that the 2025 Afghanistan-Pakistan escalation was not an isolated event but the outcome of enduring structural conditions. RSCT thus provides a comprehensive explanation for why bilateral diplomacy and episodic external intervention have repeatedly failed to produce sustainable stability.

Figure 1. Afghanistan–Pakistan Sub-Regional Security Complex (2025). The Taliban flag is used to represent Afghanistan's de facto governing

authority following the 2021 regime change



Source: Author's conceptualization based on Buzan and Wæver (2003).

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, theory-driven research design to examine the persistence and escalation of the Afghanistan-Pakistan conflict, with particular emphasis on the 2025 crisis. The methodological approach is guided by Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), which serves not only as a theoretical framework but also as an analytical guide for data selection, interpretation, and explanation. Given the study's objective to uncover structural patterns of regional insecurity rather than test causal relationships through statistical inference, a qualitative design is both appropriate and methodologically robust.

Research Design and Analytical Strategy

The research employs an explanatory qualitative approach, focusing

on how enduring regional security structures shape state behavior and conflict escalation. Rather than treating the 2025 Afghanistan-Pakistan confrontation as a discrete event, the study conceptualizes it as an outcome of long-term structural dynamics within a sub-regional security complex.

The analytical strategy combines process tracing and pattern matching. Process tracing is used to identify how historical enmity, cross-border militancy, and external power penetration interacted over time to produce the 2025 escalation. Pattern matching, meanwhile, compares observed empirical developments with RSCT's core expectations, such as high security interdependence, mutual securitization, and localized threat diffusion, to assess the theory's explanatory power in the Afghanistan-Pakistan context.

Case Selection and Temporal Scope

The Afghanistan-Pakistan dyad is selected as a critical case for RSCT analysis due to its exceptionally high level of security interdependence and the persistent involvement of non-state armed actors. The 2025 escalation is treated as a revealing episode that exposes underlying structural vulnerabilities rather than an anomaly triggered by short-term miscalculation.

Empirically, the study focuses on the period 2019-2025, enabling analysis of both pre- and post-United States withdrawal dynamics. This temporal scope allows the research to capture continuity and change in security interactions, particularly shifts in militant activity, border governance, and external involvement following the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan.

Data Sources

The study relies on triangulated qualitative data drawn from four primary sources to enhance validity and analytical depth.

First, conflict-event data are drawn from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), covering incidents of violence, cross-border attacks, and militant operations involving Afghanistan and Pakistan from 2019 to 2024. While ACLED data are not used for statistical modeling, they provide systematic empirical grounding for identifying trends, escalation patterns, and geographical concentrations of violence. ACLED data are used to identify patterns, trends, and escalation dynamics of violence rather than to establish statistical causality or quantitative generalization.

Second, the study analyzes institutional and policy reports produced by international organizations, including United Nations agencies, as well as regional security assessments published by think tanks and research institutes. These sources offer insights into border governance, counterterrorism policies, and regional security perceptions.

Third, official statements and policy documents issued by Afghan and Pakistani authorities are examined to identify securitization narratives and threat constructions. These materials are particularly useful for tracing how political elites frame security challenges and justify extraordinary measures.

Fourth, peer-reviewed academic literature and authoritative monographs are used to contextualize empirical findings within existing scholarly debates. This literature informs both the theoretical framing and the interpretation of observed security dynamics.

While structured conflict datasets provide comprehensive coverage through 2024, the analysis of the 2025 Afghanistan–Pakistan escalation additionally draws upon official government statements, international organization reports, and contemporaneous reporting from reputable

international media sources. These materials are used to reconstruct escalation dynamics, identify patterns of interaction, and assess their implications for regional security interdependence. The purpose is not to generate new quantitative conflict-event datasets but rather to provide a qualitative assessment of the 2025 escalation within the analytical framework of Regional Security Complex Theory.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis proceeds in three stages. In the first stage, conflict-event data and policy documents are coded thematically to identify recurring patterns related to cross-border militancy, border enforcement measures, and military responses. In the second stage, these patterns are interpreted through RSCT concepts such as security interdependence, patterns of amity and enmity, and external power penetration. In the final stage, the analysis assesses whether the 2025 escalation conforms to RSCT expectations, thereby evaluating the framework's explanatory utility.

Importantly, non-state armed actors are treated not merely as intervening variables but as structural components of the regional security complex. Their mobility, operational autonomy, and

interaction with state policies are analyzed as integral to the reproduction of regional insecurity.

Validity, Reliability, and Ethical Considerations

To enhance analytical validity, the study employs data triangulation across multiple sources and types of evidence. Reliability is strengthened through the use of publicly accessible datasets and institutional reports, enabling transparency and replicability. While the research relies on secondary data, it adheres to ethical research standards by critically evaluating source credibility and avoiding unverified claims.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the reliance on secondary data may obscure local-level dynamics not captured in institutional reports or conflict datasets. Second, the qualitative nature of the study limits generalizability beyond comparable regional security complexes. Third, while RSCT provides a powerful structural framework, it may understate the role of short-term leadership decisions and domestic political contestation. These limitations, however, do not undermine the

study's central objective of explaining structural patterns of insecurity.

Methodological Contribution

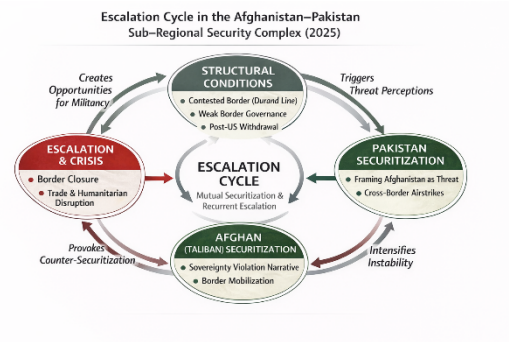
By explicitly operationalizing RSCT in a qualitative, data-informed analysis and integrating non-state actors as structural elements, this study demonstrates a replicable methodological approach for analyzing sub-regional security complexes. This contributes not only to RSCT scholarship but also to broader methodological debates in regional security studies.

Empirical Analysis

The escalation of conflict between Afghanistan and Pakistan in 2025 represents a critical empirical manifestation of the sub-regional security complex identified in this study. Rather than constituting an isolated crisis triggered by short-term miscalculation, the escalation reflects the interaction of enduring structural conditions: persistent border contestation, transnational militant mobility, mutual securitization, and the altered balance of external power penetration following the United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan. Examined through the lens of Regional Security Complex Theory, the 2025 confrontation

illustrates how localized security incidents are amplified by high levels of security interdependence.

Figure 2. Escalation Cycle in the Afghanistan–Pakistan Sub-Regional Security Complex (2025).



The diagram illustrates how structural conditions, non-state armed group activity, and mutual securitization interact to produce recurrent escalation, as explained by Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT).

Source: Developed by the author based on empirical findings and RSCT analytical concepts.

Structural Context Prior to the 2025 Escalation

The 2025 Afghanistan–Pakistan escalation emerged from a broader pattern of deteriorating security conditions that had been developing since the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in August 2021. Rather than constituting a sudden crisis, the confrontation reflected the cumulative effects of increasing militant activity, weakening border governance, and

persistent mutual distrust between Kabul and Islamabad.

Importantly, the deterioration of security conditions between 2021 and 2024 did not simply reflect a quantitative increase in militant violence. It also marked a gradual transformation in the character of regional security interaction. Whereas earlier confrontations were predominantly localized and centered on counterterrorism operations along the border, developments leading to the 2025 escalation increasingly involved reciprocal military signaling, expanded cross-border operations, and growing contestation over sovereignty. These developments indicate that the structural environment underpinning Afghanistan–Pakistan relations had evolved beyond routine border insecurity into a more complex pattern of regional security competition.

Available conflict-event datasets indicate a sustained increase in militant violence across Pakistan during the post-2021 period. According to the Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (PICSS), terrorist attacks and terrorism-related fatalities increased significantly between 2022 and 2023, with Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) remaining the most active militant organization. Similarly, Armed Conflict Location and Event Data

Project (ACLED) records show a rising frequency of attacks targeting Pakistani security forces, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan provinces, which border Afghanistan. The geographical concentration of violence along the frontier underscores the close linkage between developments in Afghanistan and Pakistan’s internal security environment (PICSS, 2024; ACLED, 2024).

Table 1. Trends in Terrorist Violence in Pakistan, 2022–2024

Year	Terrorist Attacks	Fatalities	Main Contributing Group
2022	380	539	TTP
2023	645	976	TTP
2024	908	1,158	TTP

Source: Compiled by the author from Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (PICSS, 2024) and Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED, 2024).

Note: The table presents annual trends in terrorist violence in Pakistan during the period 2022–2024. These data are used to illustrate the deteriorating security environment preceding the 2025

Afghanistan–Pakistan escalation and do not constitute direct measurements of the 2025 crisis itself.

As shown in Table 1, militant violence in Pakistan increased dramatically between 2022 and 2024. The number of terrorist attacks rose from 380 incidents in 2022 to 645 in 2023 and further increased to 908 incidents in 2024. Similarly, fatalities increased from 539 deaths in 2022 to 976 in 2023 and reached 1,158 in 2024. This trend demonstrates a significant deterioration of Pakistan's security environment following the Taliban's return to power and highlights the growing influence of cross-border militancy on domestic security. The sustained increase in attacks and fatalities reinforced perceptions within Pakistan that instability in Afghanistan remained closely linked to Pakistan's internal security challenges. Moreover, the geographical concentration of violence along the frontier indicates that these security challenges increasingly assumed a regional character rather than remaining purely domestic. This pattern reinforces RSCT's proposition that geographically proximate actors experience the highest levels of security interdependence.

The Taliban's return to power initially generated expectations within

Pakistan that cross-border militancy would decline. Instead, relations gradually deteriorated as Pakistani authorities increasingly accused the Afghan Taliban of failing to prevent TTP activities from Afghan territory. Reports by the United Nations Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team repeatedly highlighted the presence of TTP fighters and affiliated networks in eastern Afghanistan, particularly in provinces bordering Pakistan. These findings reinforced Islamabad's perception that developments inside Afghanistan posed a direct threat to Pakistan's domestic security and contributed to growing tensions between the two governments (United Nations Security Council, 2024).

At the same time, the Taliban administration faced significant governance challenges, including economic contraction, humanitarian pressures, internal factional competition, and limited international recognition. These constraints reduced the regime's capacity to establish effective control across peripheral regions and complicated efforts to regulate militant activity along the border. Consequently, formal border-management mechanisms became increasingly ineffective, while informal security arrangements and local power structures assumed greater

importance (UNAMA, 2024; Felbab-Brown, 2022).

Alongside these governance challenges, the Taliban also underwent a gradual process of institutional consolidation, particularly within the security sector. This process became increasingly visible through the consolidation of security and border-management institutions, enhancing the Taliban administration's capacity to coordinate military and security responses at the national level.

This institutional transformation did not eliminate regional insecurity; rather, it altered the character of security interaction between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Security tensions were no longer driven solely by weak state capacity but increasingly reflected interactions between Pakistan and a de facto governing authority with greater organizational coherence and an expanding ability to coordinate security responses.

The weakening of border governance further exacerbated security concerns. The Afghanistan–Pakistan frontier has historically been characterized by porous borders, limited state presence, and extensive cross-border social and economic networks. Following the

Taliban's return to power, these longstanding structural vulnerabilities became increasingly difficult to manage. Militant groups were able to exploit governance gaps, mobility corridors, and local support networks, thereby complicating efforts by both governments to contain cross-border violence and prevent security spillovers.

From the perspective of Regional Security Complex Theory, these developments illustrate a deepening pattern of security interdependence. Insecurity originating in Afghanistan increasingly generated direct consequences for Pakistan's domestic security, while Pakistan's military responses and border-management policies were interpreted by Afghan authorities as infringements upon sovereignty. This reciprocal dynamic strengthened mutual threat perceptions and reinforced patterns of securitization on both sides of the border. Rather than representing isolated security incidents, these developments reflected the operation of a broader sub-regional security complex in which insecurity in one state generated direct consequences for the other, creating the conditions that enabled the 2025 escalation.

These structural conditions became increasingly visible during the 2025

escalation. A series of cross-border security incidents, militant attacks, retaliatory military responses, and restrictions on border movement intensified tensions between Kabul and Islamabad. Pakistani authorities attributed several security incidents to militant networks operating from Afghan territory, while Afghan officials rejected these allegations and criticized Pakistani responses as violations of sovereignty. The resulting cycle of accusation, retaliation, and diplomatic tension demonstrated how localized security incidents could rapidly expand into a broader regional security crisis. Rather than representing an isolated event, the 2025 escalation reflected the cumulative impact of long-standing security interdependence, weak border governance, and persistent mutual distrust.

Non-State Armed Actors as Structural Drivers

Non-state armed groups played a central role in transforming underlying structural tensions into recurrent security crises between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Among these actors, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) emerged as the most significant source of insecurity in the Afghanistan–Pakistan borderlands following the Taliban’s return to power in Afghanistan in 2021. The group

substantially expanded its operational activities, increasing attacks against Pakistani security forces, government institutions, and civilian targets. According to Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (PICSS) data, terrorist attacks increased from 380 incidents in 2022 to 645 incidents in 2023, with Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) remaining the most active militant organization operating against Pakistan during this period. The growing operational tempo of TTP contributed significantly to the rise in militant violence observed after the Taliban’s return to power in Afghanistan (PICSS, 2024).

The resurgence of TTP generated growing tensions between Islamabad and Kabul. Pakistani authorities repeatedly accused the Afghan Taliban of tolerating, facilitating, or failing to prevent TTP operations from Afghan territory. These allegations were reinforced by reports from the United Nations Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, which identified the continued presence of TTP fighters and affiliated networks in eastern Afghanistan. The persistence of these networks strengthened Pakistan’s perception that developments inside Afghanistan posed a direct threat to national security and justified increasingly

assertive border-control measures and military responses (United Nations Security Council, 2024).

At the same time, the relationship between the Afghan Taliban and TTP remained complex. While both organizations share ideological roots, historical linkages, and personal networks developed during decades of conflict, available evidence suggests that TTP retains substantial operational autonomy. Rather than functioning as a direct proxy of the Afghan Taliban, the organization pursues its own strategic objectives while benefiting from the permissive security environment created by weak border governance and limited state control across frontier regions (Giustozzi, 2022; Felbab-Brown, 2022).

This distinction is analytically significant for understanding regional security dynamics. Pakistan increasingly viewed the Taliban's inability or unwillingness to restrain TTP as evidence of a broader security threat, regardless of whether direct operational control existed. Consequently, it was the perception of cross-border insecurity—rather than formal organizational ties alone—that intensified mutual securitization between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In addition to TTP, Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISIS-K) further contributed to regional insecurity. ISIS-K continued to conduct attacks against Taliban institutions, religious minorities, and civilian populations across Afghanistan. Although ISIS-K and the Taliban remain strategic rivals, both groups have exploited conditions associated with weak governance, porous borders, and political instability. The presence of multiple militant actors operating simultaneously within the same security environment complicated counterterrorism efforts and increased uncertainty for both Afghan and Pakistani authorities (United Nations Security Council, 2024; SIPRI, 2024). The simultaneous presence of TTP and ISIS-K demonstrates that the Afghanistan–Pakistan security environment is shaped by multiple non-state actors whose activities transcend national borders and complicate conventional state-centric approaches to security management.

The coexistence of multiple armed groups with distinct objectives also demonstrates that regional insecurity cannot be attributed to a single organization or bilateral dispute. Instead, overlapping militant networks created a security environment in which state responses were

directed not only against specific groups but also against broader perceived sources of instability. This complexity reinforced the persistence of mutual threat perceptions and further complicated efforts to establish cooperative border-security mechanisms.

The role of non-state armed actors extends beyond their immediate operational activities. From the perspective of Regional Security Complex Theory, groups such as TTP and ISIS-K function as structural drivers of insecurity rather than merely episodic sources of violence. Their ability to operate across borders, exploit governance gaps, and influence state threat perceptions directly shapes patterns of regional security interdependence. Each major attack attributed to TTP reinforced Pakistan's securitization of developments within Afghanistan, while Pakistani military responses intensified Afghan concerns regarding sovereignty and external interference.

Consequently, non-state armed groups became integral components of the Afghanistan-Pakistan security complex. Their activities not only generated immediate security threats but also reproduced the deeper dynamics of mistrust, securitization, and reciprocal insecurity that characterize relations between the two states. The persistence of

these actors demonstrates that regional insecurity cannot be explained solely through interstate relations; rather, it is sustained by the interaction between state and non-state actors operating within the same security environment.

Mutual Securitization and Escalatory Dynamics

The escalation of tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan during 2025 illustrates the process of mutual securitization emphasized within Regional Security Complex Theory. Rather than responding solely to objective security threats, both states increasingly interpreted each other's actions through a security lens, transforming localized incidents into broader regional confrontations. This process contributed to the reproduction of insecurity and reinforced existing patterns of regional security interdependence. This reciprocal process also helps explain why successive confidence-building efforts repeatedly failed to produce lasting de-escalation, as each side increasingly interpreted the other's security measures as confirmation of hostile intent.

From Pakistan's perspective, the growing frequency of attacks attributed to Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) constituted a direct threat to national

security. Pakistani authorities consistently argued that militant groups operating from Afghan territory were responsible for attacks against security forces and civilian targets inside Pakistan. Consequently, developments within Afghanistan became increasingly securitized within Pakistani political and security discourse. Cross-border militancy was no longer viewed merely as a law-enforcement challenge but as a strategic threat requiring military, intelligence, and border-control responses (United Nations Security Council, 2024; PICSS, 2024).

This securitization process contributed to a range of policy measures, including intensified border security operations, stricter movement controls, cross-border strikes, and diplomatic pressure on the Taliban administration. Pakistani policymakers justified these measures as necessary responses to persistent militant threats. However, actions intended to enhance Pakistan's security frequently generated unintended consequences within Afghanistan.

From the perspective of the Taliban administration, Pakistani military operations and border-management policies were increasingly interpreted as violations of Afghan sovereignty. Airstrikes, border closures, and military

deployments along the frontier reinforced perceptions that Pakistan posed a security challenge to Afghanistan. As a result, Afghan authorities also engaged in securitization processes, portraying Pakistani actions as threats to territorial integrity and political autonomy. These perceptions strengthened nationalist narratives and reduced opportunities for cooperative security management.

The interaction between these competing securitization processes generated a self-reinforcing cycle of escalation. The resulting security dilemma was therefore sustained not only by material threats but also by mutually reinforcing interpretations of those threats, illustrating the relational nature of insecurity emphasized by RSCT. Measures adopted by Pakistan to improve security were interpreted by Afghanistan as hostile actions, while Afghan responses were perceived by Pakistan as evidence of insufficient cooperation against militant groups. Each side's efforts to enhance security therefore contributed to the insecurity of the other, producing what RSCT describes as a pattern of security interdependence.

The 2025 crisis demonstrates how security dynamics within the Afghanistan–Pakistan sub-region cannot be understood

solely through material capabilities or isolated security incidents. Instead, conflict escalation was driven by mutually reinforcing threat perceptions, reciprocal securitization, and the absence of effective mechanisms for managing cross-border insecurity. This pattern reflects a core assumption of Regional Security Complex Theory: security is relational, and the security choices of one actor inevitably shape the security environment of others within the same regional complex.

Viewed through this perspective, the 2025 escalation represents not a temporary deterioration in bilateral relations but the continuation of a broader structural pattern of insecurity. The persistence of mutual securitization demonstrates how regional security complexes can sustain conflict even when neither side actively seeks large-scale confrontation. Consequently, the Afghanistan–Pakistan case illustrates how reciprocal threat construction can sustain and reproduce regional insecurity over time.

External Power Penetration after U.S. Withdrawal

The post-2021 security environment significantly altered the structural conditions of the Afghanistan-

Pakistan sub-complex. The withdrawal of the United States removed an external actor that had previously constrained escalation through military presence, diplomatic pressure, and financial leverage. In RSCT terms, this reduced external stabilizing penetration, increasing the autonomy and volatility of regional actors (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

While other external powers, including China, Iran, and Russia, maintained selective engagement, none possessed the capacity or willingness to enforce regional stability. Pakistan's strategic alignment with China provided diplomatic backing but did not translate into effective conflict mediation. Afghanistan, meanwhile, remained diplomatically isolated, further reducing incentives for restraint (SIPRI, 2024).

The absence of a dominant external stabilizer allowed underlying structural tensions to surface more openly in 2025, confirming RSCT's expectation that changes in external penetration can significantly reshape regional security dynamics without altering core patterns of enmity.

Border Governance Breakdown and Economic Spillovers

Beyond military escalation, the 2025 crisis disrupted border governance and economic exchange. Repeated closures of key transit points along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border affected trade, humanitarian access, and civilian livelihoods. These disruptions intensified societal insecurity, particularly in border regions already characterized by poverty and weak governance (World Bank, 2024).

RSCT emphasizes that security interdependence extends beyond the military sector. Economic and societal spillovers reinforced mutual perceptions of vulnerability, deepening hostility and reducing the political feasibility of compromise. In this sense, the crisis demonstrated how non-military dimensions of security contribute to escalation within a regional security complex.

Empirical Implications for RSCT

The 2025 Afghanistan-Pakistan escalation provides strong empirical support for several core propositions of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT). First, the case confirms RSCT's central argument that security threats tend to be geographically clustered and are transmitted most intensely among proximate actors. Developments within Afghanistan directly influenced Pakistan's

domestic security environment through cross-border militancy, while Pakistani military responses generated reciprocal political and security consequences within Afghanistan. This pattern demonstrates that security interactions within the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands cannot be adequately understood through isolated national analyses but must be examined as part of a broader structure of regional security interdependence.

Second, the findings demonstrate the persistence of mutual securitization despite significant political and strategic changes within the region. The return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan altered the regional political landscape but did not fundamentally transform patterns of mistrust and threat perception. Instead, both governments continued to interpret each other's actions through a security lens. Pakistan securitized Afghanistan as a source of militant violence, while Afghan authorities increasingly viewed Pakistani military actions and border-management measures as threats to sovereignty. The persistence of these securitization dynamics suggests that changes in political leadership alone are insufficient to overcome deeply embedded regional security structures.

Third, the Afghanistan-Pakistan case highlights the need to broaden

contemporary applications of RSCT by more explicitly incorporating non-state armed actors into regional security analysis. Organizations such as Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISIS-K) do not merely trigger episodic security incidents. Rather, their operational mobility, organizational autonomy, and ability to shape state threat perceptions make them structural components of the regional security complex. Their activities influence state behavior, contribute to mutual securitization, and continuously reproduce insecurity across national borders. This finding suggests that contemporary regional security complexes characterized by weak governance and transnational militancy require analytical approaches that move beyond exclusively state-centric assumptions.

Fourth, the case provides further support for RSCT's concept of external power penetration. The withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan reduced the influence of a major external stabilizing actor and increased the autonomy of regional security dynamics. Although external powers such as China, Russia, and Iran remained engaged in the region, none exercised a comparable capacity to constrain escalation. Consequently,

underlying patterns of rivalry, insecurity, and militant mobility became more visible and more difficult to manage. The findings therefore suggest that external intervention may temporarily suppress regional insecurity without necessarily transforming the deeper structure of the security complex itself.

Taken together, these findings indicate that the Afghanistan–Pakistan conflict is best understood not as a sequence of isolated bilateral crises but as the manifestation of a persistent sub-regional security complex characterized by entrenched security interdependence, mutual securitization, and the structural influence of non-state armed actors. The case therefore reinforces the continuing relevance of RSCT while also suggesting the need for theoretical refinement in regions where state authority is fragmented and transnational militant networks play a central role in shaping regional security dynamics.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendation

This article set out to explain the persistence and escalation of the Afghanistan-Pakistan conflict, with particular focus on the 2025 crisis, through the lens of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT). By conceptualizing

Afghanistan and Pakistan as a tightly coupled sub-regional security complex, the study demonstrates that the 2025 escalation was not an isolated incident driven by short-term miscalculation, but rather the manifestation of enduring structural conditions embedded within regional security dynamics.

Theoretical Contributions

The study makes three interrelated theoretical contributions. First, it advances RSCT scholarship by applying the framework specifically to the Afghanistan-Pakistan dyad, challenging the tendency to subsume Afghan security dynamics under broader India-Pakistan rivalry. The analysis shows that Afghanistan-Pakistan interactions exhibit sufficient autonomy, intensity, and continuity to warrant treatment as a distinct sub-regional security complex.

Second, the article extends RSCT by explicitly integrating non-state armed actors as structural components of regional security complexes. The empirical analysis demonstrates that groups such as the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan and ISIS-K are not merely spoilers or proxies, but actors whose mobility, autonomy, and interaction with state policies actively reproduce patterns of insecurity and mutual

securitization. This finding contributes to ongoing debates on the applicability of traditionally state-centric theories in contexts characterized by fragmented authority and transnational militancy.

Third, the study reinforces RSCT's explanatory value in post-intervention environments. The findings show that changes in external power penetration, particularly following the withdrawal of the United States, can significantly alter escalation dynamics without transforming underlying patterns of enmity. This underscores RSCT's capacity to explain continuity amid change in regional security behavior.

Empirical Findings

Empirically, the 2025 escalation illustrates how high levels of security interdependence transform localized incidents into broader crises. Persistent border contestation, the breakdown of governance mechanisms, and intensified militant activity interacted to produce rapid cycles of action and reaction. Mutual securitization narrowed the space for diplomatic engagement, while the absence of effective desecuritization mechanisms ensured that escalation became self-reinforcing.

The analysis further demonstrates that bilateral confidence-building measures and ad hoc crisis management are structurally insufficient in contexts characterized by entrenched enmity and transnational threats. Without institutionalized predictability and sustained cooperation, crisis recurrence remains highly likely.

Policy Implications for Afghanistan and Pakistan

From a policy perspective, the findings suggest that sustainable stability in the Afghanistan–Pakistan sub-region requires moving beyond reactive, bilateral responses. First, institutionalized border governance mechanisms are essential to reduce uncertainty and misperception. While political conditions currently constrain formal agreements, even limited technical coordination can mitigate escalation risks.

Second, counterterrorism strategies must adopt a multilayered approach that addresses not only militant operations but also governance deficits and socio-economic vulnerabilities in border regions. Human security investments are critical to weakening the structural foundations of militant resilience.

Third, external actors seeking to contribute to stability should prioritize facilitation over coercion. Heavy-handed intervention risks reinforcing securitization, whereas support for dialogue, capacity-building, and regional confidence-building may offer more sustainable outcomes.

Broader Implications for Regional Security Governance

Beyond the Afghanistan–Pakistan case, the findings contribute to broader debates on regional security governance in areas characterized by porous borders, weak state capacity, and transnational militant activity. The analysis demonstrates that security challenges rooted in structural interdependence cannot be effectively addressed through ad hoc crisis management alone. Instead, sustainable stability requires institutionalized mechanisms capable of reducing uncertainty, managing cross-border threats, and facilitating long-term confidence-building among regional actors.

The study further highlights the importance of desecuritization processes in regions affected by protracted conflict. As RSCT suggests, persistent cycles of mutual threat perception can reinforce insecurity even when material conditions remain unchanged. Consequently, efforts to

strengthen regional cooperation, border governance, and communication mechanisms remain essential components of conflict prevention and regional stability.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. Its reliance on secondary data may obscure micro-level dynamics in border communities, while its qualitative design limits statistical generalization. Future research could address these gaps through field-based studies, comparative analysis of other sub-regional security complexes, or mixed-method approaches combining qualitative and quantitative data.

Further scholarship may also explore how RSCT can be systematically adapted to contexts where non-state actors play dominant roles, refining the theory's applicability in regions characterized by fragmented sovereignty.

Concluding Remarks

Taken together, the findings reinforce the continuing relevance of Regional Security Complex Theory for understanding persistent insecurity in the Afghanistan–Pakistan borderlands and highlight the importance of addressing structural drivers of conflict alongside immediate security challenges.

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