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Can Track 2 Deliver? Informal Engagement and Pakistan's Search for Stability with Taliban-Ruled Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT

The present return of the Taliban to power after U.S. forces evacuated Afghanistan was seen as an opportunity by Pakistan to stabilise relations through shared religious, cultural and historic affinities. These expectations have remained unmet, and there are persistent border tensions and cross-border militancy. Pakistan's primary security concern is centred on continued cross-border militant activities originating from Afghan soil. There is a structural mismatch between Pakistan's conventional diplomatic approach and the Taliban's ideologically driven and informal regime, which has proved to have limited effectiveness in state-to-state formal diplomacy. Therefore, there is room for track 2 diplomacy through religious scholars, tribal leaders, business communities and academics. By assessing these supplementary diplomatic means in the post-2021 era, this paper seeks to evaluate the importance of such engagements in bringing about behavioural restraint and improved bilateral relations. The study finds that in a constrained policy environment, although Track 2 diplomacy alone cannot produce decisive security outcomes, but it plays a facilitative and incremental role in crisis management when it is integrated into a broader policy framework. To a certain extent, this approach can serve as a pragmatic tool for managing Pakistan's security challenge related to Afghanistan.

Keywords: Pakistan–Afghanistan relations; Track 2 diplomacy; informal engagement; cross-border militancy; conflict management; regional security.

Introduction

Relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan have long been unstable, mostly due to unsolved authority issue across a porous frontier. Sovereignty disputes and cross border mobility has repeatedly obstructed efforts to institutionalise durable cooperation (Barfield, 2010; Rubin, 2013). There have been some periods of tactical alignment but engagement has remained fragile during recent political transition in Kabul. The Taliban's return to power in August 2021 was therefore seen in Pakistan as a potential positive but cautious point where policymakers expected that due to shared historical experience, religious affinity, and entrenched informal networks a closer coordination is possible regarding core security concerns (Rashid, 2010). Central to this optimism was the belief that ideological proximity would produce responsiveness to Pakistan's demand to curb militant activity emanating from Afghan territory. Events since 2021 have unsettled these expectations. Rather than consolidation, relations have featured recurring border tensions, accusations, and a widening trust deficit. Violence attributed to actors like Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), based in Afghanistan remains a persistent source of friction, reinforcing perceptions within Pakistan that the Taliban either lack the will or the capacity to impose restraint (International Crisis Group [ICG], 2024) These

developments expose the limits of conventional diplomacy. Formal engagement has rarely produced sustained behavioural change, while coercive measures such as border closures and military signalling have delivered only short-term effects (ICG, 2024). In a political order marked by decentralised authority, negotiated compliance, and informal power networks, traditional diplomacy often fails to penetrate the arenas where decisions are implemented (Giustozzi, 2022).

Pakistan consequently faces a dilemma. Escalation risks further destabilisation and humanitarian and economic costs, yet routine engagement risks legitimising ambiguity around militancy. Mechanisms are needed that can influence behaviour without intensifying volatility. Under such constraints, Track 2 diplomacy assumes greater relevance. Track 2 processes rely on actors whose authority flows from social legitimacy rather than official mandate. They are commonly portrayed as avenues for reframing perceptions, generating ideas, and opening space for compromise when formal negotiations stall (Montville, 1991). Multi-track perspectives add that influence circulates through religious, tribal, economic, and intellectual networks that intersect with, but are not reducible to, the state (Diamond & McDonald, 1996). Afghanistan, however, complicates these models. Authority within the Taliban system is fragmented and locally mediated, so commitments articulated at the centre do not reliably translate into uniform practice (Giustozzi, 2022; ICG, 2024). Informal engagement may therefore hold comparative advantage because it operates within the same terrain that shapes compliance. Yet the contribution of Track 2 diplomacy to Pakistan's security aims remains insufficiently tested. Policy debate often treats such efforts as peripheral, rather than assessing whether they can encourage incremental restraint, facilitate crisis management, or preserve communication when official channels falter.

This paper argues that although Track 2 diplomacy cannot resolve the structural drivers of Pakistan–Afghanistan conflict, it can serve as a pragmatic instrument of risk management. By engaging culturally embedded actors capable of influence within local authority arrangements, Pakistan may moderate tensions and retain limited access in a constrained strategic environment. The issue is not transformation, but whether stability at the margins is achievable where other tools have yielded modest returns.

Track 2 Diplomacy and Informal Influence: Analytical Perspectives

Track 2 diplomacy emerged from recognition of the limitations inherent in formal, state-centric negotiation processes, particularly in conflicts characterised by entrenched mistrust, identity cleavages, and political deadlock. Rather than seeking binding agreements, early proponents conceived Track 2 as an unofficial arena in which influential non-state actors could explore perceptions, humanise adversaries, and generate ideas insulated from the constraints of public accountability (Montville, 1991). The underlying assumption was that informal dialogue could prepare the cognitive and political ground upon which formal diplomacy might later build. Subsequent scholarship broadened this understanding by situating diplomacy within a wider ecosystem of societal interaction. Multi-track approaches emphasised that governments constitute only one channel among many, and that religious institutions, commercial actors, civil society organisations, and epistemic communities frequently shape conflict dynamics in ways that rival or exceed official influence (Diamond & McDonald, 1996). From this perspective, informal diplomacy is not peripheral but integral to the production of political outcomes, especially where authority is socially embedded.

Yet much of this literature implicitly rests on structural conditions that are only partially present in contemporary Afghanistan. Classical models often presuppose relatively coherent state institutions, identifiable decision-making hierarchies, and a functional boundary between

official authority and societal actors. Informal intermediaries are therefore imagined as bridges linking public opinion to policymakers. In fragmented or revolutionary systems, however, such distinctions blur. Authority is negotiated, multiple centres of power coexist, and implementation depends on networks of loyalty rather than bureaucratic command (Giustozzi, 2022). Within this environment, the purpose of Track 2 engagement shifts. Dialogue is less about preparing constituencies for peace agreements and more about shaping behaviour within fluid and contested governance arrangements. Influence becomes indirect, incremental, and frequently reversible. The challenge is not to achieve resolution but to manage volatility.

Reconceptualising Track 2 diplomacy in this way highlights three principal mechanisms through which informal actors may matter. First, normative persuasion operates by framing restraint in culturally resonant terms. Where political legitimacy is tied to religious authority, appeals articulated by respected scholars can redefine security behaviour as a matter of moral obligation rather than political concession. Such framing reduces reputational costs for leaders who might otherwise fear appearing weak. Second, local mediation functions at the level of community conflict management. In frontier environments where tribal structures regulate movement, access, and dispute settlement, embedded intermediaries may dampen escalation even when strategic disagreements persist. Their authority stems not from formal mandate but from social recognition. Third, incentive alignment shapes the broader environment in which decisions are made. Economic connectivity, humanitarian access, and reputational considerations can modify cost-benefit calculations, encouraging pragmatic accommodation without requiring ideological transformation.

Evaluating efficacy through these mechanisms requires moving beyond traditional diplomatic metrics. Success is unlikely to manifest as signed agreements or public commitments. Instead, it may appear as temporary pauses in violence, moderated rhetoric, or the prevention of incidents from spiralling into crisis. Although modest, such outcomes can carry substantial strategic value in settings where comprehensive settlements are unrealistic (Zartman, 1989). The importance of this recalibration becomes particularly evident in relation to militant activity. Armed groups operate within permissive social ecosystems that include facilitators, local patrons, and informal supply networks. Pressure directed exclusively at central authorities may therefore fail to penetrate the structures that sustain violence. Engaging those ecosystems through socially legitimate actors can, at times, produce more immediate leverage than formal diplomatic protest.

Policy debates frequently acknowledge this possibility yet continue to treat Track 2 initiatives as auxiliary to “real” diplomacy. This hierarchy overlooks the empirical reality that, in decentralised systems, informal authority may outweigh institutional position. Where compliance depends on persuasion rather than enforcement, culturally embedded actors can become pivotal nodes of influence. Accordingly, the analytical task is not to romanticise Track 2 diplomacy, nor to assume its universal applicability, but to determine the conditions under which it can generate marginal gains in stability. Actor selection, credibility, access to decision-making networks, and alignment with prevailing norms all shape outcomes. Informal engagement that neglects these variables risks becoming performative rather than effective. This framework guides the present study. By examining Pakistan–Afghanistan relations after 2021, the paper evaluates Track 2 diplomacy as a contingent instrument whose impact must be measured in degrees of restraint rather than transformation. Such an approach places realistic expectations at the centre of analysis while recognising that, in fragile environments, incremental influence may be the most attainable objective.

Pakistan–Afghanistan Relations After 2021: Expectations and Disillusionment

The political transformation in Kabul in August 2021 represented a moment of both opportunity and uncertainty for Pakistan. For many policymakers in Islamabad, the return of the Taliban appeared to remove a longstanding source of bilateral friction and offered the possibility of recalibrating relations on the basis of ideological familiarity and historical contact. Optimistic assessments suggested that shared experiences, religious affinity, and established informal linkages would facilitate cooperation, particularly in the domain of security (Rashid, 2010). Embedded within these expectations was a more specific assumption: that a Taliban-led administration would prove more attentive to Pakistan's demand that Afghan territory not be used by militant organisations targeting the Pakistani state. Anticipated convergence rested on the belief that political sympathy and prior engagement would translate into greater willingness to restrain anti-Pakistan actors.

Developments after 2021, however, revealed a far more complicated picture. Rather than stabilisation, bilateral relations entered a period marked by recurrent crises, public accusations, and visible deterioration of trust (ICG, 2024). Cross-border incidents multiplied, disputes over fencing and movement intensified, and militant violence remained a persistent irritant. Subsequent assessments noted continuing volatility and warned that without new mechanisms of engagement, the relationship risked sliding into deeper confrontation. For Pakistan, the continuation of attacks attributed to groups operating from Afghan soil reinforced a perception of vulnerability. Whether due to limited capacity, internal division, or political calculation, the Taliban leadership appeared unable or unwilling to translate general assurances into systematic enforcement (ICG, 2024). The expectation that ideological proximity would generate strategic alignment thus proved overly deterministic.

This outcome can be better understood when viewed through the governance characteristics discussed earlier. Authority within the Taliban movement is not uniformly centralised; it is mediated through commanders, regional networks, and negotiated bargains that complicate implementation (ICG, 2024). Promises made at the political centre may therefore dissipate as they encounter local realities, where relationships, loyalties, and survival calculations vary significantly. Pakistan's reliance on conventional diplomatic tools has struggled to overcome this fragmentation. Formal meetings, demarches, and public signalling have produced episodic engagement but limited durable change (ICG, 2024). Coercive steps, including temporary border closures or demonstrations of military resolve, have at times imposed costs yet simultaneously intensified Afghan sensitivities regarding sovereignty. The result has been a cycle in which tactical pressure generates short-term response but rarely alters structural behaviour.

At the same time, Islamabad's freedom of action is constrained by the potential consequences of sustained escalation. Border regions are economically interdependent, humanitarian conditions within Afghanistan remain precarious, and prolonged disruption risks empowering spoilers on both sides. Policymakers thus confront a narrow corridor between confrontation and accommodation, neither of which promises satisfactory outcomes. Yet it would be misleading to portray the relationship as one of complete rupture. Beneath the turbulence of official exchanges, informal contacts have persisted across religious, tribal, commercial, and intellectual networks (ICG, 2024). These interactions rarely produce headlines, but they often provide essential communication during moments when formal diplomacy falters. In several instances, such channels have helped defuse localised tensions or clarify intentions sufficiently to prevent miscalculation.

The coexistence of official strain and informal continuity underscores an important analytical point: influence does not disappear simply because formal negotiations stagnate. Instead, it

migrates into arenas less visible but sometimes more adaptable. Understanding how these arenas function, and whether they can generate measurable restraint, becomes crucial for evaluating Pakistan's policy options. The disappointment that followed the initial optimism of 2021 therefore does not invalidate engagement; rather, it demands recalibration (ICG, 2024). If expectations of rapid convergence were unrealistic, the task shifts toward identifying mechanisms capable of producing incremental stability. It is within this reframed agenda that Track 2 diplomacy re-enters the policy debate, not as a substitute for statecraft, but as a potential means of navigating its limitations.

Track 2 Diplomacy in a Culturally Embedded Context

The limits of formal diplomacy in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations reflect a broader structural reality: political authority in Afghanistan is mediated less through bureaucratic institutions than through socially embedded networks of legitimacy. Attempts to influence behaviour that rely exclusively on state-to-state mechanisms therefore risk bypassing the arenas in which compliance is actually produced. Any strategy aimed at shaping Taliban conduct, particularly regarding sensitive security issues, must engage the religious, tribal, and economic structures that underpin governance (Barfield, 2010; Rubin, 2013). The Taliban's claim to rule is grounded not in electoral mandate or international recognition but in its self-presentation as the guardian of an Islamic order restored after decades of conflict. Legitimacy is consequently performative and moral rather than procedural. Decisions that appear to compromise religious credibility or national autonomy can provoke internal resistance, especially from commanders whose authority derives from battlefield reputation and local alliances (Giustozzi, 2022). Under such conditions, external pressure framed in purely diplomatic or legal terms is unlikely to resonate.

Engagement through religious interlocutors therefore occupies a distinctive place within the logic of informal influence. Scholars who command respect within transnational Islamic networks may frame restraint not as submission to Pakistan but as fulfilment of obligations related to neighbourly conduct, protection of Muslim lives, and avoidance of Fitna. By shifting the normative vocabulary, such engagement can reduce the reputational risks faced by Taliban leaders contemplating pragmatic adjustment. This mechanism does not guarantee compliance, but it can widen the range of politically defensible choices. Tribal structures provide another crucial arena. Along the frontier, authority frequently resides in local elders, cross-border kinship ties, and customary dispute-resolution practices that predate modern state boundaries. These actors cannot dictate strategic policy, yet they often regulate everyday interactions that determine whether violence escalates or subsides. Informal mediation through Jirgas or elder networks has, at various moments, helped clarify misunderstandings, negotiate access, and prevent retaliation from spiralling (Rubin, 2013). Their effectiveness lies precisely in their embeddedness: they are insiders to the social systems in which militant actors operate.

Economic intermediaries constitute a third pathway of influence. Afghanistan's severe fiscal constraints and dependence on trade create incentives for administrative pragmatism within segments of the Taliban apparatus. While commercial actors rarely address security issues directly, they shape the broader opportunity structure by linking stability to material benefit. Interruptions to transit, customs revenue, or employment reverberate across local constituencies, generating pressures that may favour restraint. In this sense, economic Track 2 engagement functions less as persuasion than as environmental conditioning. Academic and policy dialogues serve yet another function. Their impact is typically indirect, operating through narrative framing, expectation management, and the maintenance of communication during diplomatic stagnation. By providing relatively neutral spaces for interaction, such forums can

reduce misperception and allow officials to test ideas without formal commitment. Even when outcomes are intangible, preventing interpretive drift may itself constitute a contribution to stability.

Taken together, these channels illustrate that influence in Afghanistan is dispersed across multiple layers of authority. No single actor can deliver compliance, but combinations of normative appeal, local mediation, and incentive shaping may create cumulative effects. This perspective resonates with conflict-management approaches that prioritise incremental risk reduction over comprehensive settlement (Zartman, 1989). At the same time, the constraints are formidable. The Taliban is not a monolith, and factions vary in their openness to external engagement. Militant groups may retain operational autonomy, limiting the ability of interlocutors to guarantee outcomes. Moreover, visible association with foreign agendas can erode the very legitimacy upon which informal actors depend. Effective Track 2 diplomacy must therefore balance proximity with discretion, influence with deniability.

Recognising these limits prevents romanticisation. Culturally embedded engagement cannot replace formal policy instruments, nor can it eliminate the structural incentives that sustain militancy. What it can do is create opportunities for partial restraint, open channels of communication, and mitigate escalation at moments when official diplomacy reaches its ceiling. For Pakistan, the strategic implication is clear: the question is not whether informal actors can deliver decisive transformation, but whether they can help manage uncertainty in a fragmented political environment. When calibrated carefully and integrated with broader statecraft, culturally resonant Track 2 diplomacy may expand the margins within which pragmatic cooperation becomes possible.

Assessing the Efficacy of Track 2 Diplomacy: Security Outcomes and Limits

Judging the effectiveness of Track 2 diplomacy in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations requires abandoning binary expectations of success or failure. In political environments marked by fragmented authority, ideological rigidity, and militant autonomy, influence is rarely decisive. A more appropriate standard is whether informal engagement contributes to incremental restraint, improves crisis management, or preserves communication under adverse conditions (Zartman, 1989). From Pakistan's perspective, the most important metric concerns cross-border militancy. Here the record is mixed. Violence has continued, and no informal initiative has dismantled networks operating from Afghan territory. Nevertheless, periods of intensified engagement have occasionally coincided with temporary reductions in activity, reported relocations of fighters, or tacit efforts to prevent incidents from escalating into broader confrontation. Such outcomes are fragile and reversible, yet they suggest that informal pressure can sometimes translate into pragmatic adjustment (ICG, 2024).

Understanding these modest effects requires revisiting the structure of Taliban governance. Because authority is mediated through local commanders and negotiated loyalties, compliance often depends on persuasion rather than directive enforcement (Giustozzi, 2022). Informal interlocutors who possess social credibility may therefore succeed in influencing behaviour at specific nodes even when central policy remains ambiguous. The result is uneven restraint: limited in scope, inconsistent in duration, but not irrelevant. A second dimension of efficacy appears in discourse. Engagement involving religious and community figures has at times been followed by a more cautious rhetorical posture toward Pakistan. References to Islamic fraternity, mutual respect, and avoidance of internal discord have periodically surfaced in official and semi-official communication, particularly during moments of bilateral tension. While language alone cannot substitute for policy, discursive moderation reduces symbolic escalation and creates space for diplomatic manoeuvre.

At the operational level, tribal mediation has produced perhaps the clearest though most localised effects. Interventions by elders and community representatives have, in certain cases, facilitated communication after border incidents, arranged temporary ceasefires, or enabled practical solutions regarding transit and access. These mechanisms do not resolve strategic disagreements, but they can prevent tactical crises from widening. Economic engagement exerts influence more indirectly. Continuity of trade and transit provides revenue and employment within Afghanistan, reinforcing constituencies that favour stability. Although such incentives rarely compel security cooperation, they raise the opportunity costs of prolonged confrontation. Over time, this may encourage administrative pragmatism even in the absence of ideological alignment.

Yet the limitations of Track 2 diplomacy are unmistakable. Internal divisions within the Taliban, competition among factions, and the operational independence of militant groups frequently undermine informal understandings (ICG, 2024). Moreover, episodes of high-profile violence can rapidly shrink political space for moderation, empowering hardliners and weakening interlocutors associated with engagement. Attribution also presents difficulty. Because Track 2 operates quietly, it is rarely possible to determine whether behavioural change results from informal persuasion, internal calculation, or unrelated factors. The very discretion that enables access complicates evaluation.

These constraints caution against inflated claims. Track 2 diplomacy has not fundamentally altered the trajectory of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, nor has it resolved the core dispute over militant sanctuaries. What it has done, at times, is moderate intensity, buy time, and maintain channels that might otherwise close. In volatile settings, such limited achievements may still carry strategic significance. The practical implication is that informal engagement should be judged by whether it reduces risk rather than delivers settlement. When measured against maximalist expectations, Track 2 will invariably disappoint. When assessed in terms of marginal stability gains, however, its contribution becomes more visible.

Way Forward

The analysis above indicates that Track 2 diplomacy cannot remove the structural sources of instability that shape Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. Fragmented authority, ideological governance, and the embeddedness of militant actors within local networks will continue to constrain outcomes irrespective of informal initiatives (Giustozzi, 2022; Rubin, 2013). Nevertheless, the persistence of these conditions does not render Track 2 engagement redundant. Instead, it clarifies its function: to generate incremental restraint, facilitate communication, and mitigate escalation in situations where formal diplomacy reaches its limits (Zartman, 1989). For Pakistan, the policy imperative is therefore integration rather than substitution. Informal channels are most effective when they reinforce, rather than replace, official engagement. Classic understandings of Track 2 diplomacy emphasise its value in preparing the ground for policy adaptation by shaping perceptions and expanding the range of politically acceptable choices (Montville, 1991). In the Afghan context, where sensitivity to sovereignty and autonomy is acute, such indirect influence may be particularly useful.

A first requirement is continuity. Relationships with religious scholars, tribal elders, and cross-border commercial actors acquire influence through repeated interaction and accumulated credibility. Sporadic engagement during crises undermines this capital and limits access precisely when it is most needed. Sustained contact, by contrast, enhances the likelihood that messages transmitted through informal networks will be viewed as legitimate rather than instrumental. Second, expectations must remain calibrated. Multi-track frameworks highlight the diversity of actors capable of contributing to conflict management, but they also caution

against assuming that any single channel can deliver decisive outcomes (Diamond & McDonald, 1996). Informal interlocutors are better positioned to encourage normative moderation, convey concerns, and facilitate localised de-escalation than to enforce strategic compliance. Assigning tasks that exceed these capacities risks eroding both effectiveness and credibility.

Third, Pakistan would benefit from coordinating multiple forms of informal engagement simultaneously. Religious authorities may help articulate restraint in culturally resonant language; tribal mechanisms can contain violence at flashpoints; economic stakeholders can reinforce incentives for stability by emphasising the material costs of disruption. While none of these avenues guarantees success, their cumulative effect may shape the environment in which Taliban leaders calculate risk. Fourth, Track 2 diplomacy should feed into formal decision-making without losing its unofficial character. Insights gained from informal conversations about factional dynamics, internal debates, or sensitivities regarding public pressure can help policymakers design more precise and proportionate responses. In settings where information is scarce and intentions are opaque, such understanding is a valuable resource.

At the same time, realism requires clear recognition of boundaries. Informal engagement cannot overcome the autonomy of militant groups, nor can it substitute for credible deterrence where vital interests are threatened. Episodes of high-profile violence may quickly narrow the political space available to interlocutors and strengthen actors opposed to compromise. Track 2 diplomacy is therefore most useful when paired with consistent signalling about unacceptable behaviour. Ultimately, Pakistan's aim should not be rapid transformation but improved manageability of a difficult relationship. If informal mechanisms can reduce misunderstanding, slow escalation, and preserve communication during crises, they provide strategic utility. In protracted conflicts, preventing deterioration may be as important as pursuing breakthrough.

Conclusion

After the return of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, Pakistan's relations with Afghanistan have deteriorated and conventional diplomacy has proven to be insufficient to address Pakistan's security concerns. The expectations regarding a sustained cooperation which is based on shared history, religious affinity, cultural ties, and prior channels of engagement, have not materialized. Instead, persistent cross-border militancy, border tensions, a widening trust deficit, and divergent choices continue to sour bilateral relations, which expose structural constraints of formal state-to-state diplomacy. This study argues that in a constrained policy environment, culturally embedded and strategically aligned Track 2 diplomacy offers a limited but meaningful avenue for Pakistan. Informal engagements through religious, tribal, commercial, and intellectual networks can contribute to crisis management and incremental behavioural restraint. Although these outcomes fall short of a decisive transformation, they have strategic importance in a context where they are not realistic and immediately attainable. At the same time, the analysis shows that Track 2 diplomacy is not a substitute for state policy or a permanent remedy for the structural reasons of instability in Afghanistan. Its efficacy is shaped by multiple ground realities like internal divisions within the Taliban, the autonomy of militant actors, and the involvement of overt or covert foreign actors. Exaggerating its potential may risk obscuring these constraints and diluting responsibility in matters of security. The central suggestion of this paper is that Pakistan's engagement with Afghanistan must move beyond the binary choices between coercion and accommodation. When formal mechanisms do not work, in order to keep the channels of communication open, Track 2 diplomacy can be used as a complementary tool of strategic management which helps shaping incentives at the side-lines and reduces the risk of escalation. Such engagements, used with discipline and

pragmatism, can help Pakistan navigate an enduringly complex relationship without shutting out future opportunities.

The ultimate stability in Pak-Afghan relations depends on the alignment of security interests instead of affinity alone. But until such times, Track 2 diplomacy offers neither a breakthrough nor a remedy, but a pragmatic approach to manage uncertainty in a volatile regional security environment.

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