



## **Pakistan and the Pakistani Taliban: Nurture a Viper in Your Bosom**

If, in the summer of 2021, Pakistan interpreted the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan as a strategic success that would allow it to consolidate its influence in Kabul<sup>1</sup> —where it had helped install a potentially manageable ally— subsequent developments have exposed the over-optimism of that assessment. Far from behaving as a subordinate actor aligned with Islamabad's interests, the Afghan Taliban have reasserted their political and strategic autonomy, consolidating an independent course of action that does not always coincide with Pakistani expectations. This evolution has not emerged abruptly but rather confirms a trend already discernible in preceding years: the gradual detachment of the Taliban movement from any form of external tutelage. By regaining power in Kabul, Pakistan has lost one of its principal levers of influence over the Taliban—the ability to offer them a secure sanctuary. Consequently, Islamabad has seen its capacity for influence significantly diminished, while its former protégés have acquired a far greater degree of freedom of action than in the past. Since then, tensions between the two neighbours have steadily escalated, reaching what Islamabad has characterized as a state of open war.

The roots of the crisis lie in a complex interplay of immediate security concerns and long-standing territorial and structural disputes. Since the establishment of the second Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in August 2021, Pakistan has accused several militant groups—particularly Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)—of operating from Afghan territory. Kabul, for its part, has denied these allegations and has in turn accused Pakistan of violating Afghan sovereignty, especially through cross-border airstrikes. These tensions are further aggravated by unresolved historical issues, including disagreements over the Durand Line, which demarcates the border between the two countries, and the competing strategic interests that have shaped their bilateral relations since 1947.

In recent months, these problems have led to an escalation that appears difficult to reverse. Despite multiple mediation efforts by regional actors such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey —all of them maintaining close ties with Pakistan— successive ceasefires have failed to hold, and negotiations have thus far yielded no tangible results. The escalation of the conflict has resulted in incidents with a high number of casualties,

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<sup>1</sup> Ruiz Arévalo, Javier. *Paquistán frente los talibanes paquistaníes: cría cuervos y te sacarán los ojos*. Global Strategy. Universidad de Granada. Marzo 2022. [Paquistán frente los talibanes paquistaníes: cría cuervos y te sacarán los ojos | Global Strategy](#)

many of them civilians. The United Nations estimates that since late February 2026, 289 people have been killed or injured within Afghanistan. Comparable statistics for the Pakistani side of the border are not systematically compiled by the UN, although civilian casualties within Pakistan have reached their highest levels in the past decade. Despite its potential repercussions, the severity of the situation has been partially overshadowed by the crisis involving Iran, the United States, and Israel.

The primary source of tension has been the presence on Afghan soil of fighters belonging to the so-called Pakistani Taliban, the TTP—an Islamist group that Islamabad considers a direct threat to its national security. Pakistan accuses Kabul of allowing the TTP to operate from Afghan territory, or at least of failing to take sufficient measures to neutralize it. The Taliban government, for its part, has avoided direct confrontation with the group, partly due to ideological affinities and partly as a matter of internal calculation, generating considerable frustration in Islamabad.

Another source of tension has been Pakistan's policy of deporting Afghan refugees, particularly since 2023, which has triggered criticism and diplomatic friction with Kabul. In that year, Pakistan launched a large-scale campaign to expel Afghan refugees, which its government framed as a counterterrorism measure.<sup>2</sup> In 2025 alone, approximately one million individuals were deported.<sup>3</sup>

These issues are compounded by recurrent incidents along the border, especially in the Pashtun sector of the Durand Line—the de facto boundary between the two countries, which Afghanistan does not officially recognize. Armed clashes, border closures, and disputes over Pakistan's fencing of the frontier have been frequent. These frictions reflect a longstanding structural problem that has intensified in the current political context. Border closures are particularly damaging for Afghanistan, as a significant portion of its international trade passes through Pakistani territory. Moreover, this is an artificial boundary that divides tribes and clans that have historically ignored it in their personal and commercial relations, as well as in the seasonal migration of their livestock. Its closure thus constitutes a serious challenge for local communities. At present, the border

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<sup>2</sup> Fahrney, Megan. *Why Pakistan Is Deporting Afghan Migrants*. Council on Foreign Relations. December 15, 2023. <https://www.cfr.org/articles/why-pakistan-deporting-afghan-migrants>

<sup>3</sup> Peltier, Elian and ur-Rehman, Zia. *Fed Up With the Taliban, Pakistan Expels One Million Afghans*. The New York Times. Nov. 30, 2025. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/11/30/world/asia/pakistan-afghans-mass-expulsions.html>

remains largely closed, except for the return of Afghans deported by Pakistan. Afghanistan perceives these measures as coercive and destabilizing, whereas Pakistan justifies them on grounds of internal security and economic necessity.

Overall, the relationship has evolved into an increasingly complex and volatile scenario: from a presumed relationship of dependency to an interaction between two actors with partially divergent interests. Pakistan has discovered that its influence over the Taliban is limited, while the Taliban government seeks to balance its need for international recognition with the assertion of its sovereignty.

### **The Roots of the Conflict and Afghanistan–Pakistan Relations Since the Taliban Return to Power**

Although bilateral relations have deteriorated in recent years, Afghanistan and Pakistan were allies in the early 1990s. The ISI, Pakistan's powerful intelligence service, played a key role in bringing the Taliban to power in 1996 and continued to support them after they were ousted, when they transformed into an insurgency against the Kabul government and its allies. It is therefore unsurprising that, when U.S. forces withdrew from Afghanistan in 2021 and the Taliban returned to power, Islamabad welcomed the new government. Then-Prime Minister Imran Khan stated that the Taliban's return meant that Afghans had "broken the chains of slavery."<sup>4</sup> However, from the outset, the new de facto authorities in Kabul made it clear that they had no intention of submitting to the dictates of their eastern neighbour.

Beyond other minor disagreements—such as the recognition of the Durand Line as the official border—the immediate origin of the conflict lies in Pakistan's accusation that Kabul provides refuge to the Pakistani Taliban, who operate from Afghan territory. Despite Afghan denials, this claim appears to be well-founded. Indeed, violence linked to Islamist groups has continued to rise. According to CNN, more than 1,200 people were killed in Pakistan in 2025, more than double the figure recorded in 2021.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Hakimi, Hameed. *Analysis: Why have Pakistan's ties with the Afghan Taliban turned frigid?* Al Jazeera. 28 Dec 2024. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/12/28/analysis-why-have-pakistans-ties-with-the-afghan-taliban-turned-frigid>

<sup>5</sup> Salfi, Sophia et al. *Pakistan's defense minister says latest clashes with Taliban mean 'open war.' What's happening?* CNN. Feb 27, 2026. <https://edition.cnn.com/2026/02/27/asia/afghanistan-pakistan-strikes->

## The Escalation of the Conflict Between Pakistan and the Second Afghan Emirate

Since the Taliban return to power, the conflict has undergone a progressive escalation that can be analytically divided into three phases, reflecting a transition from limited clashes to direct confrontations between states.<sup>6</sup>

Phase One (2021–2023): Insurgent Attacks and Limited Clashes. The Taliban's return to power in August 2021 led to a gradual increase in armed incidents along the border. Initially, these took the form of sporadic confrontations, such as Pakistani airstrikes against TTP positions in Afghanistan and subsequent exchanges of fire with Taliban forces. From the outset, Pakistan accused Afghanistan of failing to control the Pakistani Taliban, rapidly deteriorating bilateral relations. In 2022, violence intensified, marking a turning point with artillery strikes causing civilian casualties and clashes at key border crossings. The use of heavy weaponry indicated a growing militarization of the frontier and increased the impact on civilian populations. In 2023, the conflict became more complex, combining interstate clashes with cross-border insurgent attacks. Notable incidents included clashes at the Torkham crossing, which led to border closures and disrupted trade, as well as TTP attacks in Chitral following incursions from Afghanistan. Such incidents reinforced Pakistan's accusations against Kabul and entrenched a dynamic of escalating tension, in which domestic insurgency and interstate conflict became increasingly intertwined.

Phase Two (2024–2025): Increasing Militarization. During this period, both the frequency and intensity of clashes increased. In December 2024 and February 2025, confrontations involving mortars, rockets, and artillery were recorded, linked to border disputes and insurgent movements. Pakistan also claimed to have neutralized infiltrations from Afghanistan. In October 2025, following intense fighting, both countries agreed to a temporary ceasefire mediated by Qatar and Turkey.<sup>7</sup> The agreement included

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<sup>6</sup> Ali, Rabia. *How Pakistan-Afghanistan tensions reached a breaking point*. Anadolu Ajansı. 01 March 2026. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/timeline-how-pakistan-afghanistan-tensions-reached-a-breaking-point/3842132>

<sup>7</sup> Ellis-Petersen, Hannah and Meer Baloch, *Shah*. *Dozens killed in fresh clashes along Afghanistan-Pakistan border*. The Guardian. 15 Oct 2025. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/oct/15/dozens-killed-afghanistan-pakistan-border-taliban-kurram-chaman-spin-boldak-kandahar-kabul>

commitments to halt attacks and prevent armed groups from operating from Afghan territory against Pakistan. However, subsequent negotiations failed to produce a lasting settlement, and instability persisted.

Phase Three (2025–2026): Direct Confrontations and Airstrikes. In this phase, the conflict escalated significantly, incorporating airstrikes and open combat between state forces. In October 2025, Pakistan conducted, for the first time, bombing raids داخل Afghanistan in retaliation for TTP attacks, resulting in civilian casualties. Afghanistan responded by targeting border positions, triggering widespread clashes with numerous casualties and the closure of border crossings. Fighting continued with cycles of attacks and counterattacks, conflicting casualty figures, and repeated but unsuccessful attempts at ceasefires. Despite temporary agreements, violence persisted, including Pakistani airstrikes that caused dozens of civilian deaths.

In 2026, the situation has continued to deteriorate.<sup>8</sup> On February 22, Pakistan carried out multiple airstrikes against alleged militant camps, including those of the TTP, claiming they were in response to terrorist attacks on its territory, including one targeting a Shiite mosque in Islamabad earlier that month, which resulted in more than 30 deaths.<sup>9</sup> The Taliban vowed retaliation, asserting that the strikes had hit civilian targets, including a religious school. Consequently, on February 26, they launched an offensive against Pakistani positions along the Durand Line. Following these events, on February 27, Pakistan's Minister of Defence declared that the situation amounted to open war. Pakistan's response was swift, including airstrikes on Kabul and Kandahar, the country's two principal political centres. Since then, tensions have continued to rise, with Afghan attacks on Pakistani bases, suicide bombings along the border, and a marked increase in civilian casualties.<sup>10</sup>

Despite temporary pauses facilitated by international mediation—particularly by Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar—the conflict persists. Official statements reflect Pakistan's

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<sup>8</sup> Palmer, Alexander and Margolis, Alexander. *Why Did Pakistan Announce "Open War" Against the Taliban?* Center for Strategic and International Studies. February 27, 2026. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/why-did-pakistan-announce-open-war-against-taliban>

<sup>9</sup> Malik, Shahzad and Draz, Umer. *More than 30 killed in blast at Pakistan mosque, officials say*. BBC News, 7 February 2026. [Pakistan mosque explosion: More than 30 dead and 169 injured, officials say](https://www.bbc.com/news/health-67260406)

<sup>10</sup> Martínez, Montse y Sanz, Rosa Mari. *Guerra Pakistán – Afganistán*. Actualizada 13 ABR 2026. <https://www.elperiodico.com/es/internacional/20260406/pakistan-afganistan-guerra-ultima-hora-directo-127330896>

perception of a state of war, while Afghanistan expresses a willingness to negotiate.

### **Afghan and Pakistani Taliban: Brothers or Cousins?<sup>11</sup>**

Since its creation, the TTP has claimed to be an extension of the Afghan Taliban. It is Pakistan's largest militant organization and is designated as a terrorist group by the United States. The group emerged as a by-product of the fall of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in 2001.<sup>12</sup> At that time, the exodus of fighters into Pakistan followed two main trajectories. Afghan fighters concentrated in the Quetta area, around the so-called Quetta Shura, which exercised increasing authority over them and became the nucleus of the Afghan insurgency. Tacitly or explicitly, they agreed with the ISI to receive sanctuary in exchange for refraining from operations on Pakistani soil. The other branch, composed of Pakistani and foreign fighters, settled in the border tribal areas. Much more decentralized and lacking a coherent strategy, it eventually organized itself as an insurgency aimed at overthrowing the Pakistani regime and replacing it with an Islamic republic.

The TTP initially emerged as a highly decentralized movement structured around tribal or national affiliations.<sup>13</sup> Over time, however, it gained coherence. By 2007, it had already become a significant threat to Pakistan, prompting several military operations against it. Notably, pressure from the Pakistani army drove many militants to seek refuge in Afghanistan, from where they have continued to carry out attacks داخل Pakistan. From 2013 onward, under the leadership of Mullah Fazlullah, the group moved closer to al-Qaeda and intensified cross-border operations.

Although Pakistani military operations, the U.S. drone campaign, and internal factional struggles contributed to the TTP's decline between 2014 and 2018, the group has experienced a resurgence since the February 2020 peace agreement between Washington and Kabul. Since July 2020, ten Pakistani Islamist groups have merged with

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<sup>11</sup> In Pashto, the language of the Pashtuns, there is a single word that denotes both a paternal cousin and an enemy. Centuries of disputes over adjoining lands have given rise to this curious case of polysemy.

<sup>12</sup> Laub, Zachary. *The U.S. War in Afghanistan*. Council on Foreign Relations. September 27, 2022. <https://www.cfr.org/articles/us-war-afghanistan>

<sup>13</sup> Global Conflict Tracker. *Instability in Pakistan*. Center for Preventive Action. February 2, 2026. <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/islamist-militancy-pakistan>

the TTP, including three al-Qaeda affiliates and four factions that had split from the TTP in 2014. Since then, the group's activities have multiplied.<sup>14</sup> Crucially, for the purposes of the Afghanistan–Pakistan conflict, Pakistani Taliban fighters, under pressure from the Pakistani military, have taken refuge in Afghan territory and continued their struggle from there. Islamabad has consistently accused Kabul of tolerating—or even supporting—their actions. This situation has led Pakistan to reinforce the border by fencing it, a move to which Kabul has strongly objected.

Although the Taliban have at times acted as mediators between Pakistan and the TTP, they have demonstrated a closer alignment with the latter than with their former patrons in Islamabad. The TTP has pledged allegiance to the Taliban, fought alongside them during the conflict with the United States, and shares ideological and familial ties with its Afghan counterparts. Suppressing the TTP would likely threaten the Taliban's internal cohesion, undermining their credibility as champions of Islamism and potentially prompting defections to ISIS-K, the regional affiliate of the self-proclaimed Islamic State, which is hostile to the Afghan Taliban.<sup>15</sup> The Taliban have consistently prioritized internal cohesion over other interests and show no indication of abandoning this approach.

### **An Uncertain and Troubling Future**

The conflict between Afghanistan and Pakistan has generated concern in the region due to its destabilizing potential.<sup>16</sup> While it is most likely to remain limited to border skirmishes and occasional airstrikes, the possibility of a spiral of violence cannot be ruled out, particularly at a time when the region is already experiencing heightened tensions due to the crisis involving the United States and Iran.

India has strongly condemned Pakistan's military actions, while China has attempted to

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<sup>14</sup> Sayed, Abdul. *The Evolution and Future of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan*. Carnegie Endowment. Dec 21, 2021. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2021/12/the-evolution-and-future-of-tehrik-e-taliban-pakistan>

<sup>15</sup> Ruiz Arévalo, Javier. *Daesh en Afganistán: ¿Una amenaza real?* RESI: Revista de estudios en seguridad internacional, ISSN-e 2444-6157, Vol. 2, Nº. 2, 2016, págs. 153-169. *Daesh en Afganistán: ¿Una amenaza real?* - Dialnet and, same autor, *La amenaza terrorista de Afganistán*. Global Strategy. 9 abril 2023. [Terrorismo Afganistán | Global Strategy](#)

<sup>16</sup> *India condemns Pakistan's airstrikes on Afghan territory*. The Indu. February 23, 2026. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-condemns-pakistans-airstrikes-on-afghan-territory/article70664576.ece>

mediate and offered to support de-escalation efforts.<sup>17</sup> On March 4, Afghanistan's de facto foreign minister met with the Chinese ambassador in Kabul to discuss the situation, followed by a phone conversation between the foreign ministers of both countries. Other states—including Qatar, Turkey, Russia, and Saudi Arabia—have also offered mediation,<sup>18</sup> contributing to the Taliban's growing international legitimacy.<sup>19</sup> The United States, for its part, has expressed support for Pakistan, defending its right to self-defense against Taliban attacks.<sup>20</sup> In early April, Al Jazeera reported the start of bilateral talks in China, subsequently confirmed by both Islamabad and Kabul.<sup>21</sup>

Some analysts argue that these incidents could lead to a prolonged conflict, while others consider de-escalation more likely. What is clear is that Pakistan's declaration of "open war" raises the possibility of more significant military action.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to being a nuclear power, Pakistan possesses far superior conventional military capabilities compared to Afghanistan. However, an open confrontation could have destabilizing consequences for Islamabad. Several scenarios can be envisaged. One possibility is an intensified bombing campaign against targets in Afghanistan, representing a continuation of current dynamics aimed at compelling the Taliban to control the TTP and reducing its capacity to conduct attacks in Pakistan. In this scenario, border skirmishes would likely continue intermittently for an indefinite period.

A second possibility is that the Pakistani military could undertake large-scale ground operations against the TTP within its own territory. Such an offensive could prove destabilizing and produce unpredictable effects; similar operations contributed to the

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<sup>17</sup> Bela, Victoria. *China seeks to mediate after Pakistan declares 'open war' on Afghanistan*. South China Morning Post. 27 Feb 2026. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3344907/china-seeks-mediate-after-pakistan-declares-open-war-afghanistan>

<sup>18</sup> *World reacts to eruption of fighting between Pakistan, Afghanistan*. Al Jazeera. 27 Feb 2026. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/2/27/world-reacts-to-eruption-of-fighting-between-pakistan-afghanistan>

<sup>19</sup> *Towards the Reintegration of Afghanistan into the International Community*. International Institute for Strategic Studies. December 2024. <https://www.iiss.org/publications/armed-conflict-survey/2024/towards-the-reintegration-of-afghanistan-into-the-international-community>

<sup>20</sup> *"Pakistan doing terrifically well," Trump says on Pak-Afghan situation*. Business Recorder. February 28, 2026. <https://www.brecorder.com/news/40409414/pakistan-doing-terrifically-well-trump-says-on-pak-afghan-situation>

<sup>21</sup> *Pakistan, Afghanistan hold talks in China to end months of conflict*. Al Jazeera. 2 Apr 2026. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/4/2/pakistan-afghanistan-hold-talks-in-china-to-end-months-of-conflict>

<sup>22</sup> Palmer and Margolis. op. cit.

emergence of ISIS's local affiliate in the early 2010s.

Finally, Pakistan could attempt a large-scale ground incursion into Afghanistan itself. Historically, Islamabad has sought to manage threats emanating from Afghanistan through non-state intermediaries—primarily the Taliban when they were still an insurgent group. Given the growing rift between the two and the lack of viable proxies, Pakistan's options for indirect involvement have largely disappeared. Direct military intervention in Afghan territory, therefore, cannot be ruled out, although it would be unprecedented and its outcome highly uncertain.

Given the positions adopted by both Kabul and Islamabad, reaching a mutual understanding appears difficult. Kabul seeks to assert its autonomy and has limited incentives to act decisively against the TTP, which it regards as a loyal partner. Any effective action against the group would likely provoke significant opposition within the Taliban's base, making such a decision difficult to justify. Islamabad, meanwhile, has designated the TTP as a fundamental enemy with which neither reconciliation nor negotiation is possible. The distance between these positions, combined with the costs of open conflict, may result in a pattern of coercive diplomacy: negotiations break down, hostilities resume until they become too costly, and diplomacy is re-engaged—thus creating a dangerous cycle that perpetuates the conflict at its current level.

Nor can the possibility be excluded that the conflict could escalate into a more sustained state of open warfare. Such escalation might prompt China or Russia to provide support to Pakistan in the form of arms or intelligence, although it is unlikely that China, India, or Russia would be willing to become directly involved in a war. Moreover, a war between Pakistan and Afghanistan would likely increase the threat posed by al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Khorasan Province. Given that counterterrorism remains the primary U.S. interest in the region, Washington cannot remain indifferent to developments. Although direct involvement remains unlikely, a significant escalation would be sufficiently concerning to command sustained attention. Furthermore, any shift away from neutrality by the United States could influence how other major powers—particularly China and Russia—respond to the conflict.

*Javier Ruiz Arévalo\**  
Sp Army Colonel (Res). PhD  
Euroarab Foundation for Higher Studies  
[@jmruizarevalo](#)