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FROM SANCTUARY TO "OPEN WAR": HOW PAKISTAN SOURED ON THE TALIBAN

The 2026 escalation between Pakistan and the Taliban regime governing Afghanistan marks the most overt phase of a deteriorating relationship between the two, rooted in cross-border militancy, an implied but not openly voiced border dispute, and failed coercive signaling on both sides. Pakistan launched an air campaign to raise the costs of militant sanctuaries inside Afghanistan, while the Taliban regime pushed back near the two countries' ethnic Pashtun borderland, pushing the sides to what Pakistan now describes as "open war." External actors are cautious about even direct diplomatic involvement. The United States recognized Pakistan's right to self-defense but has little appetite for on the ground involvement. The European Union emphasized de-escalation. China balances strong historical ties with Pakistan with pragmatic engagement with the Afghan Taliban—though the conflict will probably slow down the latter's attempts for diplomatic normalization. With Pakistan's conventional superiority but Afghanistan's room for asymmetric escalation, absent a political accommodation the most likely trajectory is not decisive victory for either side but intermittently escalating hostility along a hardened border.

1. FROM FRICTION TO "OPEN WARFARE"

On February 26, the Pakistani Armed Forces bombed Kabul, the Afghan capital, and Kandahar, the chief stronghold of the Taliban regime governing Afghanistan. Pakistani sources claim Operation Righteous Fury has killed or injured hundreds of Taliban members, and Khawaja Mohammad Asif, Pakistan's defense minister, has claimed that "now it is open war between us." This is the culmination of months of escalating tensions between two erstwhile cordial partners, stemming from a vicious cycle of disappointed hopes and decreasing trust since the Afghan Taliban's return to power in 2021.

Despite formally being on two opposing sides of the U.S.-led "Global War on Terror," Pakistan and the radical Islamist Afghan Taliban movement have long maintained cordial relations, and even during the years of U.S. presence in Afghanistan and close U.S.–Pakistani security ties, the Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI), Pakistan's intelligence agency, retained a working relationship with the Taliban.[1] Consequently, when U.S. troops withdrew, the internationally recognized regime and its armed forces collapsed, and the Taliban took Kabul in 2021, Pakistan expected its strategic depth to increase and the new regime to cooperate against its Pakistan-based ideological affiliates, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

What Pakistan got instead was strengthened TTP activities, allegedly operating from Afghan territory, and a regime in Kabul unwilling or unable to decisively crack down on its troublesome offshoot.[2] While on the surface the conflict is not about territory, the unresolved status of the Durand Line—the colonial-era border separating Afghanistan and former British possessions in India—and the splitting of the Pashtun ethnic homeland between the two countries is an important underlying driver of the conflict. Pashtuns traditionally form the core of Taliban both in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and discourse in Pakistan often imply that eventual territorial ambitions may drive the Afghan Taliban's support or tolerance of TTP.[3]

By Fall 2025, after years of steady deterioration, Pakistan has openly accused the Afghan Taliban of sheltering or at least sabotaging crackdown on TTP, and the two sides have engaged in multiple shooting matches across the Afghan–Pakistani border. Attempts for a negotiated settlements were made with Turkish and Qatari mediation, and after multiple rounds on Turkish soil failed, in October a ceasefire was reached in Doha.[4] Subsequent talks aiming for a lasting agreement, however, failed, and low-intensity cross-border skirmishes persisted.

Then what in late 2025 began as a low-intensity cross-border security contest in early 2026 evolved into open warfare. On February 21, Pakistan conducted airstrikes against TTP and "Islamic State" targets on Pakistani soil, while the Afghan Taliban claimed the strikes targeted civilian targets and claimed dozens

1 Bruce Riedel, "Pakistan, Taliban and the Afghan Quagmire," Brookings, August 24, 2013, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/pakistan-taliban-and-the-afghan-quagmire/.

2 Elian Peltier, "No Clear Endgame in the Conflict between Afghanistan and Pakistan," *New York Times*, February 28, 2026, https://www.nytimes.com/2026/02/28/world/asia/afghanistan-pakistan-war-taliban.html.

3 Asif Bin Ali, "Imperial Maps, Pak-Afghan War, and a Way Forward," *The Daily Star*, March 1, 2026, https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/news/imperial-maps-pak-afghan-war-and-way-forward-4117356.

4 Rachel Hagan, "Taliban and Pakistan Agree to Ceasefire after Days of Deadly Clashes," *BBC*, October 19 2025, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cze6nzpl74do.

of civilian lives. Days of low-level skirmishes then escalated into the events of February 26, when the Afghan Taliban launched "retaliatory operations" along the Afghan–Pakistani border and in turn Pakistan struck Afghan Taliban targets. In the end, Pakistan's repeated cross-border strikes failed to compel Kabul's compliance; Taliban retaliation, in turn, only strengthened Islamabad's resolve to put end to attacks on its territory by military means. Meanwhile, both sides' domestic legitimacy became tied to not appearing weak.[5]

2. THE MILITARY OUTLOOK

Conventional military asymmetries, especially in airpower and long-range strike capabilities, clearly favor Pakistan. Pakistan, a nuclear power, has large (about 650,000–660,000 personnel), by regional standards well-equipped and well-trained, and, crucially, battle-tested armed forces that in air stood their ground against India during the May 2025 Indo-Pakistani conflict and on land have gained experience in a number of counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations or in high-alert rotations along the Kashmiri Line of Control (LoC) with India.

The Afghan Taliban is not capable of deep incursion into or long-range airstrikes on Pakistani territory, and the nominally advanced equipment it "inherited" from the U.S.-backed ancien régime are suffering from insurmountable logistical and maintenance problems. The Taliban regime, however, retains partial escalation advantage in irregular warfare, plausibly deniable cross-border activities, and its ability to absorb punishment, as demonstrated in two decades of asymmetric warfighting against the United States and its allies. It can, however, still mount smaller incursions, employ drones at a lower cost and technology threshold, and leverage the Afghan-Pakistani frontier's rugged terrain that favors an informal defender against a regular military's superiority.[6]

Pakistan, therefore, has little incentive for a sustained push into Afghan territory, and the Afghan Taliban has good reasons to want to avoid a sustained high-intensity engagement that would expose its military inferiority. These constraints, however, still allow for multiple possible escalation pathways. First,

5 The Economist, "What Does 'Open War' between Pakistan and Afghanistan Amount To?" February 27, 2026, https://www.economist.com/asia/2026/02/27/what-does-open-war-between-pakistan-and-afghanistan-amount-to.

6 Peltier, "No Clear Endgame in the Conflict between Afghanistan and Pakistan"; Yogita Limaye, "Why Are Afghanistan and Pakistan Fighting?," *BBC*, February 27, 2026, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cdjmrxkwk3mo.

Pakistan could escalate "vertically" by increasing the intensity of drone warfare, cross-border raids, and persistent air strikes in the border area. Second, Pakistan could expand the conflict's territorial reach, striking higher-level Afghan Taliban military and even political targets in Kabul and other parts of Afghanistan. Third, the Afghan Taliban may step up its proxy warfare efforts in Pakistani territory, possibly involving not only the TTP but also other insurgent groups in Pakistan, such as armed Balochi separatists in the country's southwest. Such a turn would severely diminish Islamabad's room for exercising political restraint.[7]

3. EXTERNAL ACTORS—ABSENT FOR THE MOST PART

Despite their stakes, external actors are cautious about even indirect involvement and prefer managing risks without the responsibility of actively shaping outcomes. The United States frames the crisis through a counterterrorism lens and, consistently with 2025's surprising bonhomie between Pakistani leaders and President Trump, extends calibrated support for Pakistan's "right to defend itself."[8] Washington retains some concern over Afghanistan potentially serving as a platform for transnational militant networks, but with two decades of military presence having ended just about four years ago, there is very little U.S. appetite for managing any conflict in the region directly on the ground.

The European Union emphasized de-escalation and the principle that Afghanistan's territory must not be used to threaten other states.[9] The EU's leverage is, however, even more limited than that of the United States. Relative restraint and care for civilian lives is, nevertheless, in most major international parties' interest, as a larger-scale humanitarian crisis could fuel further radicalization and militancy.

Meaningful mediation is not emerging from regional states either. China has deep strategic interest in Pakistan's stability on multiple grounds. First, a potential spillover of Islamist militancy from Afghanistan and Pakistan's poorly controlled areas is seen in Beijing as a threat to Xinjiang, China's own Muslim-majority western region. Second, the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor, an

7 Peltier, "No Clear Endgame in the Conflict between Afghanistan and Pakistan."

8 Callum Jones, "US Backs Pakistan's 'Right to Defend Itself' against Taliban after Strikes on Afghanistan," *The Guardian*, February 28, 2026, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/feb/28/us-backs-pakistans-right-to-defend-itself-against-taliban-after-strikes-on-afghanistan.

9 Council of the European Union, "Statement by the High Representative on Behalf of the EU on the Escalation between Afghanistan and Pakistan," February 28, 2026, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2026/02/28/statement-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-eu-on-the-escalation-between-afghanistan-and-pakistan/.

overland transport corridor connecting China's western hinterland to the Indian Ocean, promises to circumvent the maritime chokepoints of Southeast Asia vulnerable to U.S. naval interference. Third, Pakistan has been a time-tested ally and ever-looming second-front leverage against India, with which China has major territorial disputes in the Himalayas and which in the past decade has become an ever-closer strategic partner of the U.S.-led anti-China balancing coalition.

At the same time, Beijing has been pursuing a pragmatic policy toward Afghanistan's post-2021 Talib regime, engaging in limited diplomatic outreach that did not entail formal recognition but opened the possibility of eventual Chinese investment in the country's mining sector.[10] In the current conflict, China prefers de-escalation but has little ambition for exposing itself through direct involvement in conflict resolution.

India's position, while similarly indirect, is an interesting case study in unsentimental leveraging of any viable partner against hostile neighbors. New Delhi has traditionally opposed the Taliban movement on account of the Talibs' role as Pakistan's regional partners and by virtue of them being a dangerous organization of Islamist militants. When the U.S. presence was withdrawn in late 2021, India was among the most vocal critiques of Washington's unilateral move that threatened to plunge the region into further instability.

In late 2025, however, New Delhi laid down the red carpet for Amir Khan Muttaqi, foreign minister of Afghanistan's Taliban regime, and agreed to scale up its diplomatic representation in Kabul.[11] India need not be directly involved in the Taliban–Pakistan conflict to reap the benefits of its longtime enemy getting bogged down along its porous western border. Just the specter of Indian–Taliban outreach is a looming source of anxiety for Islamabad, which already accuses New Delhi of supporting Balochi separatism in southwestern Pakistan. From an Indian perspective, the situation's irony is not lost: Historically, it was India that accused Pakistan of harboring anti-India terrorist elements on its territory, and Pakistan has condemned or retaliated against any Indian cross-border operation targeting these actors. This usual formula is now playing out one country removed from India's border, with Pakistan switching roles.

10 Nishtha Kaushiki et al., "China's Economic Engagement as Strategic Deterrence in Afghanistan," November 26 2025, https://www.iai.it/en/publications/c10/chinas-economic-engagement-strategic-deterrence-afghanistan.

11 Chietigj Bajpaee, "India Is Seeking to Reset Relations with the Taliban. But Can This Rapprochement Last?," Chatham House, October 15, 2025, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/10/india-seeking-reset-relations-taliban-can-rapprochement-last.

The escalation, however, cuts directly against the Afghan Taliban's recent efforts to normalize its foreign relations. Since taking power in 2021, Kabul's Taliban authorities have been aiming for formalized engagement with and ideally eventual diplomatic recognition from global and regional actors. These efforts have yielded partial success: Diplomatic channels were opened with China, Russia, Turkey, Qatar, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, and, more recently, India, working relations resumed, and some embassies in Kabul were even reopened—although formal diplomatic recognition was not achieved in any of these bilateral relationships. The current conflict with Pakistan undermines one core claim, though, namely that the Afghan Taliban is done with providing platform for transborder militancy aimed against other countries. Existing diplomatic relations with the Taliban are unlikely to vanish as a consequence, but further normalization is likely to become slower and more cautious.

4. CONCLUSION

The 2026 Pakistan–Taliban war's short-term geopolitical consequences do not compare to the ongoing war in Iran. Its lessons for the parties involved and for the Afghan Taliban's external partners are nevertheless important. Pakistan, a longtime partner of the Taliban, whose military-intelligence establishment saw cross-border Islamist militancy as a legitimate instrument for advancing state interests, now faces blowback. Militant networks cultivated for their geopolitical utility do not reliably remain subordinate to the interest of their erstwhile state supporters. The Taliban regime in turn faces the inverse problem: It yearns for external normalization but is hesitant to give up its traditional relationship with its ideological brethren in Pakistan.

With Pakistan's conventional superiority and the Afghan Taliban's asymmetric capabilities, neither side is positioned to achieve decisive military success. Pakistan can inflict serious damage, but it cannot easily compel political compliance in Kabul. The Taliban regime in Afghanistan can keep Pakistan on edge in the two countries' borderlands but cannot hope to conventionally defeat the Pakistani Armed Forces or secure broad international legitimacy while it is engaged in cross-border irregular warfare. All in all, absent a political accommodation on TTP sanctuaries in Afghanistan's territory and on the rules of engagement of cross-border actions against non-state actors, the likeliest longer-term outcome is neither a decisive war with a Pakistani victory nor lasting de-esca-

lation, but instead intermittently escalating hostility along a hardened border.

Beyond the Afghanistan–Pakistan bilateral relationship, intermittent escalation also risks entrenching a wider pattern of instability across the "South-Central Asian" region stretching across the Arabian Sea to the south and post-Soviet Central Asia to the north. Persistent cross-border militancy and state retaliation may further blur the line between state and non-state conflict, strengthen cross-border militant networks, and create permission structures for other non-state armed actors (such as "Islamic State" affiliates) to exploit security vacuums. This could potentially affect conflict zones like the Balochi region (divided between Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan) or the ethnic Tajik borderlands between Afghanistan and Tajikistan. Should such current or potential conflict zones flare up, militarized, conflict-ridden border areas would disrupt trade corridors and cause severe refugee pressures.

At the geopolitical level, India stands to gain from sustained low-intensity conflict in the Afghan–Pakistani borderlands and Islamabad's continued strategic distraction. China, meanwhile, faces increasing pressure to balance its investment exposure in Pakistan with its aim for pragmatic engagement with the Taliban authorities in Kabul. The United States, despite rhetorical support for Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts, will almost certainly remain practically disengaged, limiting its ability to meaningfully shape outcomes (and reflecting its disinterest in doing so). Amid these dynamics, managed instability in the region is a far likelier outcome than the emergence of formal alignments or concerted efforts to ease tensions.

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