



Taliban-Pakistan Relations Unravel Over Cross-border Terrorism

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By Abdul Basit

SYNOPSIS

The recent rise in Afghanistan-Pakistan tensions will embolden the terrorist networks that the latter seeks to dismantle due to cross-border terrorism. While Pakistan expects Afghanistan to disarm, demobilise, and dislodge Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) from its Afghan hideouts, the latter expects the former to engage in negotiations with the terrorist group. Because of this fundamental disconnect in the entrenched positions of both sides, tensions will increase and endure even if a ceasefire is reached.

COMMENTARY

On 27 February 2026, tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan reached a peak following Islamabad's decision to expand the scope of its [airstrikes](#) in Afghanistan amid a surge in cross-border terrorism. Pakistan targeted the hideouts of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and also hit Afghan border checkpoints and military installations. Kabul [responded](#) with a large-scale ground operation along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

Since then, clashes have occurred intermittently as both sides have hardened their positions, pushing the already fragile situation into [uncharted territory](#). Pakistan has declared an "[open war](#)" against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, while Kabul has resolved to fight Islamabad even if the conflict continues for a [decade](#).

The two countries had achieved a fragile [ceasefire](#) in October 2025 through Qatari and Turkish mediation but intermittent firefights continued along the borders. Subsequently, Saudi Arabia also [mediated](#) talks, but apart from the October truce, no conclusive agreement was reached.

Owing to the tensions in the Middle East following the US-Israel attack on Iran in February 2026, the Gulf countries have shown little interest in cooling the Afghanistan-Pakistan tensions. China is currently engaged in [shuttle diplomacy](#) to persuade both sides to stop the conflict but with limited success. However, the longer these tensions persist, the more they will provide space for terrorist networks in the region.

The Main Bone of Contention

In August 2021, when the Taliban regained power, Pakistan had [hoped](#) to secure their cooperation to eliminate anti-Pakistan militancy in return for its assistance in restoring their strict theocratic rule in Afghanistan.

Pakistani optimism regarding the Taliban was based on the flawed assumption that after taking power, the Taliban would behave like a rational state actor rather than a reactionary insurgent movement.

Islamabad's simplistic perspective ignored deep-rooted battlefield [bonds](#), ideological affinity, as well as ethnic and geographical connections between the Taliban and TTP. The latter [swears](#) allegiance to the former's supreme leader and aims to establish a Taliban-style Sharia state in Pakistan through an armed insurrection.

Pakistan mistakenly believed that it possessed enough political, economic and geographical leverage over landlocked Afghanistan to dictate terms to the Taliban and secure the cooperation it desired against TTP and similar groups.

Contrary to these expectations, the Taliban's victory had a [revitalising](#) effect on Pakistani jihadist groups. The Taliban's patronage, logistical assistance and strategic guidance enhanced operational capabilities of these Pakistan-focused terrorist networks, leading to an unprecedented surge of terrorism within Pakistan.

On Kabul's insistence, Pakistan entered into two short-lived [peace deals](#) with TTP in 2021 and 2022, but these were largely unsuccessful. In fact, TTP used these deals to buy time, relocate its fighters in Pakistan, and to resurrect and expand its network.

Differing Perceptions and Clashing Politics

While Pakistan considers the TTP and other Pakistani terrorist networks as protégés of the Taliban, the latter views these groups as Pakistan's [internal](#) problem. Pakistan also asserts that TTP and other groups operate from Afghanistan under the Taliban's protection.

Conversely, the Taliban argue that Pakistan externalises its internal security problems to hide its [failures](#). Kabul also claims that although it can help Pakistan overcome these issues, Afghanistan cannot resolve Pakistani's security failures.

Pakistan expects Kabul to disarm, demobilise and dispel TTP from its Afghan hideouts. Kabul, on the other hand, urge Pakistan to accept the terrorist group as a

legitimate stakeholder and engage in [talks](#) patterned after the model of past US-Taliban negotiations in Doha between 2018 and 2020.

Islamabad, however, urges Kabul to fulfill its counterterrorism obligations under the Doha Agreement 2020 to ensure that Afghanistan's territory is not used for terrorism against other countries. Kabul maintains the view that, legally, the Doha Agreement was between Afghanistan and the US, and Pakistan is not a [party](#) to it.

These diverging perceptions and conflicting notions of politics relating to the TTP and other Pakistan-focused terrorist networks have prevented cooperation between Kabul and Islamabad.

Will Pakistan's Aggressive Stance Address the Terrorism Challenge?

Although the Taliban rulers in Afghanistan are no [match](#) for Pakistan's conventional military forces, their two-decade-long experience in asymmetric warfare gives them enough space to absorb Pakistani airstrikes and retaliate at the [sub-conventional](#) level through suicide bombings and drone attacks.

Crucially, defying Pakistani pressure enhances the Taliban's [political legitimacy](#). For domestic and ideological considerations, the Taliban cannot afford to appear weak in the face of apparent Pakistani aggression.

The Taliban's legitimacy depends on two factors: restoring peace in Afghanistan and standing up to the country's external adversaries. If the Taliban succumb under Pakistani pressure and disown the TTP, it will not only weaken their ideological legitimacy within the jihadist world but also make them appear [weak](#) to the Afghan population.

Therefore, Pakistani airstrikes will change the Taliban's ideological calculus for the worse. Rather than weakening the Taliban-TTP nexus, Pakistani military aggression will [strengthen](#) it further. Similarly, due to the ongoing tensions between the two sides, terrorism is likely to increase. The TTP has already announced its annual [spring offensive](#) to escalate attacks within Pakistan. Finally, regional chaos resulting from Afghanistan-Pakistan tensions will embolden the very terrorist networks that Pakistan aims to eliminate.

Conclusion

Given the hardened positions in Afghanistan and Pakistan following the recent cycle of tensions, it is clear that de-escalation is highly unlikely. Islamabad has announced that airstrikes will continue until the Taliban [disowns](#) the TTP. The Taliban, on the other hand, have dismissed Pakistan's demand as a figment of its [imagination](#).

As a result, violence will likely escalate, although a full-scale war is unlikely. Even if a ceasefire is agreed upon, it will likely not hold. Consequently, a prolonged cycle of tensions will continue in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, with regional diplomacy to keep tensions within manageable limits.

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