



Afghanistan-Pakistan: The Overlooked War at the Margins of the Middle East Conflict

Isabelle SAINT-MÉZARD

Isabelle Saint-Mézard
is an Associate
Research Fellow in
Ifri's Center for Asian
Studies.

The opinions expressed in
this text are the responsibility
of the author alone.

ISBN: 979-10-373-1200-6

© All rights reserved,
Paris, Ifri, 2026.

Picture: © Shutterstock.com

How to quote this publication:

Isabelle Saint-Mézard,
"Afghanistan-Pakistan:
The Overlooked War at
the Margins of the
Middle East Conflict",
*Letter from the Center
for Asian Studies*,
No. 116, Ifri,
March 31, 2026.

Ifri

27 rue de la Procession
75740 Paris Cedex 15
Tel.: (0)1 40 61 60 00
Email: accueil@ifri.org
www.ifri.org

Pakistan has historically maintained the closest ties to the Taliban movement and initially viewed its return to power in Afghanistan in the summer of 2021 with considerable optimism. The bilateral relationship has since deteriorated, and the two neighbors have been caught in a cycle of escalation since last fall. In October 2025, Pakistan launched its first airstrikes on Kabul. For three weeks in February–March 2026, Afghanistan intensified ground assaults on the Pakistani side of the border as well as drone attacks on Islamabad and Rawalpindi. Pakistan, for its part, has intensified airstrikes on Afghan border areas, as well as on Kabul and Kandahar. Given the dynamics at play at the bilateral and regional levels, the prospects for a sustained return to stability appear limited.

The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) at the heart of the conflict

The intensification of terrorist attacks by the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)—a movement opposed to the federal government—on Pakistani territory is the primary driver of the escalating tensions between Islamabad and the Taliban regime. The TTP is a terrorist group composed of Pakistani Pashtuns from the tribal areas who have historically been close to the Afghan Taliban. In addition to ethnic ties, their proximity to the Afghan Taliban is ideological and is reflected in their strict interpretation of Islam (Deobandi school),

though they are more susceptible to international jihadism as embodied by Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. The TTP's objective is to establish an Islamic emirate in Pakistan modeled on the Afghan Taliban regime.

The TTP carried out a series of deadly attacks in Pakistan, particularly between 2008 and 2011, and in 2014. The group eventually lost ground, however, due to counterterrorism operations by the Pakistani military and U.S. drone strike campaigns, which eliminated its three successive leaders (Baitullah Mehsud in 2009, Hakimullah Mehsud in 2013, and Mullah Fazlullah in 2018). During the second half of the 2010s, many TTP members retreated to Afghanistan, where they found refuge with the Taliban and even fought alongside them against North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces.

Regional Environment of Pakistan and Afghanistan



© A. Lamothe/Ifri, 2026.

In the months following the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan, the TTP resumed its attacks against Pakistan. Several hundred TTP fighters were released from Afghan prisons in the summer of 2021 and returned to bolster the group's ranks; the TTP has also gained

organizational cohesion under the leadership of its new commander, Noor Wali Mehsud. Pakistan, for its part, initially relied on its historical ties with the Taliban and asked them to help manage the resurgence of the TTP. In 2022, Prime Minister Imran Khan's government began negotiations with the TTP, with Afghanistan acting as mediator. However, these negotiations failed by the end of 2022. As the TTP intensified its attacks, Islamabad turned against the Taliban authorities, accusing them of harboring the group and facilitating its cross-border operations. In 2025, more than 660 Pakistani military and paramilitary personnel, as well as 580 civilians, were killed in attacks mostly attributed to the TTP.

Pakistani pressure on Kabul

In the absence of meaningful cooperation, Pakistan is now intent on compelling Kabul to take action against the TTP on its territory and is correspondingly increasing pressure to that end. Islamabad has targeted Afghan refugees in Pakistan—estimated at over 4 million—and has deported nearly a million of them back to Afghanistan. It has also closed the border, thereby cutting off Afghanistan's main transit routes to the outside world. These measures were accompanied by an upsurge in violence along the border, including exchanges of heavy artillery fire, followed by an escalation from the air, with the Pakistani Air Force striking TTP training camps as well as Taliban army units beginning in February 2026. On February 27, 2026, the Pakistani Minister of Defense declared “open war with Afghanistan”.

The Afghan Taliban, however, have not turned against the TTP fighters. Not only do they consider them brothers in blood and arms, but they also see them as a useful lever of pressure in their highly asymmetrical relationship with Pakistan. Furthermore, they fear that by attacking TTP members, they might drive them toward the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), their main rival. The Taliban are indeed opposed to ISKP's global ambitions, and they have actively fought against the group. Historically, it was defections of TTP fighters that led to the formation of ISKP in 2014–15 in eastern Afghanistan. These various factors suggest that the Taliban will not—or will only minimally—yield to Pakistani pressure and that bilateral tensions are likely to persist, bringing with them their share of deadly violence.

Mediation and opportunism by major regional actors

Following Pakistan's airstrikes in October 2025, Qatar and Turkey urged Pakistan and the Taliban to negotiate a ceasefire, which was quickly violated. Saudi Arabia joined the efforts, but negotiations stalled in late November 2025. After the peak of violence in February–March 2026, the three states nevertheless secured a five-day truce from Kabul and Islamabad to coincide with the celebrations marking the end of Ramadan.

China, too, has been attempting discreet mediation since 2025, without much success. It will likely continue its efforts, driven by concerns over potential destabilization in the “Af-Pak” region—adjacent to China's Xinjiang province, which has historically been exposed to jihadist influences—and by the risk that Afghanistan could once again emerge as a sanctuary for terrorist groups hostile to China.

India, for its part, is making no mediation efforts, as its relationship with Pakistan has been at an all-time low since their four-day armed conflict in May 2025. While Delhi has always held a very negative view of the Taliban, the Indian government has nevertheless initiated a surprising rapprochement with them in order to regain influence in Afghanistan. Demonstrating tangible progress in this direction, India hosted a high-level Taliban delegation in October 2025, led by Afghan Foreign Minister Amir Muttaqi, and announced the reopening of its embassy in Kabul and an increase in its financial and humanitarian assistance. Few developments could alarm Pakistan more than a potential alignment between India and Afghanistan—two neighbors with whom it maintains unresolved border disputes. From Islamabad's perspective, any Indian influence in Kabul is perceived as an attempt to “encircle” Pakistan and is therefore viewed as a threat that must be countered at all costs.

As for the Trump administration, it has generally supported Pakistan's military campaign against Afghanistan in the name of the “right to self-defense”. This support is part of the rapprochement that Washington and Islamabad began in May 2025, which infuriates New Delhi. Bolstered by the Trump administration's relative goodwill, Pakistan felt free to intensify its strikes against Afghanistan starting in February 2026.

The war in the Middle East: Increased risks for Afghanistan and Pakistan

The war in the Middle East presents several challenges for Pakistan and Afghanistan. For Pakistan, it disrupts hydrocarbon supplies and exacerbates economic difficulties. On the Afghan side, its impact is primarily humanitarian. To compensate for the closure of the Pakistani border, Kabul has turned to Iran, which became its top trading partner in 2025. But access routes to the ports of Bandar Abbas and Chabahar are now so uncertain that Afghanistan is struggling to bring in even its most essential imports. Moreover, the war has forced thousands of Afghan refugees in Iran to return to their home country, further exacerbating food insecurity in the country.

At this stage, Iran's prolonged destabilization could further weaken the security situation in the country's border areas with Afghanistan and Pakistan, particularly by facilitating the activities of numerous insurgent and terrorist groups. Furthermore, it could have repercussions within Pakistan's significant Shia minority (15% of the population) and create tensions with the Sunni majority. Finally, Pakistan could face pressure to intervene in the war under the Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement it signed with Saudi Arabia in September 2025. However, Islamabad does not want to be drawn into a war that would put it at odds with its Iranian neighbor. Instead, Pakistan has skillfully offered to facilitate negotiations between Iran and the United States. If its role as a mediator were to be confirmed, Pakistan could maintain functional ties with Tehran and Riyadh, confirm its strategic utility to the United States, and gain more room to maneuver in its own war against Afghanistan.