

PAKISTAN- AFGHANISTAN RELATIONS: THE NEW REGIONAL POWER PLAY AND SECURITY CONCERNS

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Abstract

This study argues that the 2025 escalation in Pakistan–Afghanistan relations marks a structural turning point in the bilateral security paradigm rather than a continuation of cyclical border tensions. While the US withdrawal in 2021 provided a permissive strategic environment, it was the confluence of three factors, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) reorganisation from Afghan territory, increased militarisation of the border along the Durand Line, and competitive regional repositioning by China, Russia, India, and Iran, that made the relationship a regionalised security contest. The article has two primary assertions. To start with, the exacerbation of the relations in 2021-25 is a shift out of the proxy-buffer expectation to the open militarised deterrence that fundamentally alters the strategic choice of Pakistan towards Afghanistan. Secondly, the Saudi Arabia-Turkiye-Qatar trilateral mediation framework in October 2025 is a new pattern of managing conflicts in the region with Muslim majority states on the lead which heralds the redistribution of diplomatic powers by the western powers to South-Central Asian crises. With a collection of official statements, policy reports, datasets of conflicts, as well as regional diplomatic documents of 2021-2025 in view, this article argues that Afghanistan has shifted into a stage of both great-power military intervention to a research laboratory of regionally controlled politics of security. The 2025 crisis is therefore a turning point that is redefining the relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan in the framework of a multipolar regional order.

Keywords: Diplomacy, Militancy, Border, Conflict, Security

Introduction

A complex interplay of geography, history, culture, and strategic imperatives has long defined the Pakistan-Afghanistan relationship. In South Asia, few bilateral relationships have been as

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consequential yet as volatile as that between Islamabad and Kabul. Their history is anchored in deep-rooted ethnic linkages, intertwined security concerns, and a shared border stretching over 2,600 kilometres.¹ The relationship continues to shape the political and security fabric of the broader region. The developments following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 have further intensified these dynamics.² This has introduced a new layer of geopolitical uncertainty and transformed Afghanistan into an arena for evolving regional power contests. It is within this intricate context that Pakistan's contemporary security concerns and diplomatic choices must be understood.

Historically, Pakistan and Afghanistan have shared a relationship marked by trust deficits, strategic anxieties, and divergent political worldviews. Since Pakistan's independence in 1947, Afghanistan was the only country to oppose its entry into the United Nations, rooted primarily in Kabul's refusal to recognise the Durand Line as the official border.³ Furthermore, during the General Ayub Khan era, the question of Pakhtoonistan further strained ties throughout the 1950s and 1960s, laying the groundwork for a relationship characterised by mutual suspicion. Yet, despite political disagreements, the people-to-people connection remained strong due to tribal, cultural, and linguistic affinities along the borderlands.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 marked a turning point. Pakistan emerged as a frontline state supporting the Afghan Mujahideen with the backing of the United States and Saudi Arabia during General Zia-ul-Haq's era.⁴ The decade-long Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan not only reshaped regional politics but also created long-lasting demographic and security consequences. Over 3 million Afghan refugees migrated to Pakistan.⁵ Moreover, during the democratic phase of Pakistan, the civil war of the 1990s and the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan further reshaped perceptions, with Pakistan being one of the few states to recognise Taliban rule before 2001.

Geographically, the Durand Line remains both a bridge and a barrier. It connects communities and trade routes, but also serves as one of the world's most challenging security frontiers due to mountainous

¹ Muhammad Kashif Irshad, "Border Management and National Security in Pakistan: A Strategic Case Study of the Durand Line," *Advance Social Science Archive Journal* 4, no. 01 (2025): 1465–74.

² Al Jazeera, "Pakistani, Afghan Forces Exchange Deadly Border Fire: What's Next?" *Al Jazeera*, October 12, 2025.

³ Lutfur Rehman, *Revisiting the Durand Line: Historical and Legal Perspectives* (Islamabad: IPS Press, 2023), 45

⁴ Al Jazeera, "How Pakistan Misread the Taliban and Lost Peace on the Frontier," *Al Jazeera*, October 1, 2025.

⁵ Research, Sat. "Afghan Refugees in Pakistan." *South Asia Times*, August 21, 2025. <https://southasiatimes.org/afghan-refugees-in-pakistan/>.

terrain, porous crossing points, and a historically weak state writ on both sides. This geographical reality has enabled cross-border tribal interaction but has also facilitated militant movements, smuggling networks, and illicit trade. Thus, the very geography that links the two states also amplifies their security vulnerabilities.⁶

After the Incident of 9/11, Afghanistan occupied a critical position. Pakistan became part of the US War on Terror under the leadership of President General Pervaiz Musharraf. This had direct implications for regional security, trade, energy corridors, and counterterrorism efforts. For Pakistan, Afghanistan is more than a neighbour. It is a strategic buffer state. A peaceful Afghanistan promises secure borders, improved trade through transit corridors, and reduced militant activity. Conversely, an unstable Afghanistan translates into refugee influxes, cross-border terrorism, and heightened involvement of hostile intelligence networks, most notably those emanating from India.⁷

The Pakistani-Afghan relationship has fluctuated historically between wariness and suspicion, and was organised around border contestation, sanctuary for militants, flows of refugees, and rival regional alignments. Yet the years between the withdrawal of United States forces from Afghanistan in August 2021 and the October 2025 violent escalation at the border are more than another episodic downturn. It represents a structural shift in the bilateral security equation and a restructuring of regional crisis management mechanisms. This article addresses a crucial question: Was the 2025 Pakistan-Afghan escalation merely another cycle of border tension, or is there a structural shift in bilateral security relations and regional conflict management in the post-U.S. withdrawal environment? This study advances two interrelated arguments. First, the escalation of 2025 represents a shift from earlier Pakistani expectations of strategic depth during the rule of a Taliban regime to a doctrine of overt deterrence and fortified border control. The revival of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) from Afghan territory, and the reluctance of Kabul to take concrete action has heightened Pakistan's threat perception towards its neighbour.

Second the Saudi Arabia-Turkiye-Qatar coordinated intervention in October 2025 is an emerging precedent of the intra-regional Islamic mediation model, and it is evident that there is a growing trend in how Pakistan-Afghanistan crisis management is being transformed from Western-led to regionally anchored diplomatic mechanisms. While existing literature on Pakistan-Afghanistan relations has minutely

⁶ "The Durand Line - A Razor's Edge between Afghanistan & Pakistan," n.d. <https://www.efsas.org/publications/study-papers/the-durand-line-a-razors-edge-between-afghanistan-and-pakistan/>

⁷ Nazir Ahmad Mir, "Pakistan's TTP Challenge and Afghanistan-Pakistan Relations." *The Diplomat*, February 8, 2024.

discussed repeatedly the disputes over the Durand Line, strategic depth doctrine and post-9/11 counterterrorism alignments, this article contributes three analytical innovations: It marks the year 2025 as a critical juncture, not merely as a continuation of post-2021 instability, It conceptualises trilateral Gulf-Turkish mediation as a regional conflict management model, not as ad hoc diplomatic engagement. It places the Pakistan-Afghanistan tensions in the context of the broader multipolar rearrangements of the geopolitical environment of Afghanistan in which China, Russia, Iran and India recalibrated their influence after U.S withdrawal. Thus, instead of a descriptive timeframe, 2021-2025 in the article is conceptualised as a period of systemic transition in regional security ordering.

Objective of Study

1. To identify 2025 as a critical juncture, not simply a continuation of post-2021 instability.
2. To conceptualise trilateral Gulf-Turkish mediation as a regional conflict-management model, rather than ad hoc diplomatic engagement.
3. To situate Pakistan-Afghanistan tensions within the broader multipolar restructuring of Afghanistan's geopolitical environment, where China, Russia, Iran, and India recalibrated their influence following U.S. withdrawal.

Research Methodology

In this research, there is a qualitative approach to the analytical process that is based on a piece of evidence. It is based on official policy statements of Pakistan and Afghanistan, Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) briefings, United Nations humanitarian reporting, South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP) datasets, Congressional Research Service reports, Regional diplomatic communiques (2021-2025), Peer-reviewed scholarship on post-withdrawal security dynamics. The research draws on triangulation of casualty claims, infiltration data, and records of mediation in order to avoid relying upon single-source attributions. Where any figures are in dispute (e.g. October 2025 clashes) claims are presented comparatively and explicitly attributed.

US-Afghanistan Relations Post-Withdrawal

The United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan on 30 August 2021 marked the end of a twenty-year military presence that began after the 9/11 incident in 2001, when America was attacked by Al Qaida. Although the withdrawal formally ended America's longest war but it did not conclude U.S. strategic involvement. Instead, Washington shifted toward a recalibrated posture aimed at counterterrorism, humanitarian

support, and strategic competition in a rapidly changing regional environment.⁸

Over-the-Horizon Counterterrorism Strategy -after the withdrawal, the Biden Administration adopted an “over-the-horizon” strategy emphasising remote surveillance, intelligence partnerships, and targeted drone operations. With no military bases or troops inside Afghanistan, the U.S. relies primarily on regional airspace access, satellite intelligence, and cooperation with friendly states for counterterrorism operations.⁹

This shift is controversial. Intelligence analysts note that although the United States maintains global ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance) capabilities, the absence of physical presence limits situational awareness and rapid response.¹⁰ Some assessments caution that the over-the-horizon model may reduce the U.S. capacity to detect terrorist plots at early stages, allowing extremist groups more operational space.¹¹

Absence of Formal Recognition of the Taliban Government

Despite the Taliban establishing the *Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan* in August 2021, the United States has not extended formal diplomatic recognition. Washington argues that recognition is conditional upon Taliban commitments to counterterrorism, inclusive governance, and women’s rights.¹²

In contrast, geopolitical rivals have adopted a divergent approach. In July 2025, Russia became the first major power to formally recognise the Taliban government by accepting the credentials of a Taliban ambassador in Moscow (Gul Hassan), a move widely seen as an attempt to increase Russian influence in Central and South Asia.¹³

Conditional Engagement

The United States adopted a conditional engagement approach that distinguishes between humanitarian assistance and political recognition. U.S. aid is routed through the UN, the World Food Programme, and international NGOs—ensuring that resources do not directly legitimize Taliban rule. Humanitarian assistance remains substantial, with the U.S.

⁸ Congressional Research Service, *Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy* (2022).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Modern Diplomacy, “The U.S.–Taliban Talks: A Strategic Shift in Counterterrorism,” October 18, 2025.

¹² CRS, *Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy*.

¹³ Reuters, “Russia Becomes First Country to Recognise Taliban Government,” July 3, 2025.

being one of the largest donors to Afghan relief efforts from 2021 to 2025.¹⁴

A central condition for deeper engagement revolves around women's rights. Washington criticizes the Taliban's restrictions on female education, workforce participation, and freedom of movement. U.S. policymakers have repeatedly stated that any movement toward normalization depends on verifiable improvements in women's rights and governance transparency.

Counterterrorism conditionality remains equally critical. The U.S. insists that the Taliban must sever operational links with al-Qaeda and prevent groups such as Islamic State–Khorasan (IS-K) from using Afghan territory. Although the Taliban claims compliance, U.S. intelligence reports continue to highlight the persistence of ties between the Taliban and elements of al-Qaeda.

Reliance on Qatar as Diplomatic Intermediary

In the absence of direct diplomatic ties, the United States asked Qatar to play the role of its primary intermediary. Doha hosted the U.S. political office for Afghanistan and facilitated indirect dialogue on counterterrorism, humanitarian coordination, and detainee issues.¹⁵ In January 2025, Qatar brokered a significant prisoner exchange between the U.S. and the Taliban.¹⁶ The episode underscored Qatar's continued relevance as a neutral facilitator and demonstrated Washington's pragmatic approach: engaging the Taliban where necessary while withholding diplomatic recognition.

U.S. Strategic Concerns

Re-Emergence of Extremist Safe Havens

A principal American concern is that Afghanistan may once again become a hub for extremist groups. The absence of U.S. forces complicates real-time monitoring, and the fragmentation of Taliban factions may enable certain regions, particularly in eastern and southern Afghanistan, to harbour militants more freely.¹⁷

Taliban–al-Qaeda Ties

Despite Taliban assurances under the Doha Agreement signed on February 29, 2020 intelligence assessments indicate that Taliban–al-

¹⁴ United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Afghanistan Assistance Reports, 2021–2024.

¹⁵ Modern Diplomacy, "The U.S.–Taliban Talks," 2025.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ CRS, Terrorism and Security Assessments in Afghanistan, 2023.

Qaeda ties persist at ideological and operational levels.¹⁸ These ties raise alarm in Washington, particularly regarding the possibility that Afghanistan could again serve as a platform for global terrorism planning.

Strategic Penetration by China, Russia, and Iran

The U.S. is increasingly concerned about the growing influence of **China, Russia, and Iran**, each of which seeks to capitalize on the post-withdrawal vacuum:

China is pursuing investment in Afghanistan's untapped mineral reserves and exploring integration of Afghanistan into the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI¹⁹).

Russia, after recognising the Taliban government on July 3, 2025, is deepening security and economic ties with Kabul, including discussions on counter-narcotics and regional trade.²⁰

Iran maintains a pragmatic relationship, balancing ideological tensions with a need for border stability and expanded energy trade with Afghanistan.²¹

The growing footprint of these powers challenges U.S. influence in a region previously shaped by American military and diplomatic presence. The U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan has warned that this geopolitical shift could erode Western leverage in counterterrorism and regional stability discussions.²²

Future Trajectory

The post-U.S. withdrawal strategy reveals a complex balance: deterrence without deployment, engagement without recognition, and aid without empowerment of the Taliban regime. Analysts noted a gradual evolution in U.S. policy, from initial confidence in over-the-horizon capabilities to a more cautious, multi-layered approach combining intelligence operations, conditional diplomacy, and cooperation with regional actors like Qatar.²³

Ultimately, the sustainability of U.S.-Afghanistan relations depends on whether the Taliban fulfil commitments on counterterrorism and

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ ASC Central Asia Studies Journal, "China's Expanding Influence in Post-Withdrawal Afghanistan," 2024.

²⁰ Reuters, "Russia Recognises Taliban Government," 2025.

²¹ Eurasia Review, "Iran's Policy Toward Afghanistan After U.S. Withdrawal," 2024.

²² Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), "Power Shifts in Afghanistan After U.S. Withdrawal," 2022.

²³ Eurasia Review, "Iran's Policy Toward Afghanistan After U.S. Withdrawal," 2024.

human rights, and on how effectively Washington navigates the rising influence of China, Russia, and Iran in Afghanistan.

Consequences to the Pakistan-Afghanistan Security Dynamics

The transition of the U.S. to an over-the-horizon posture indirectly heightened the level of tension between Pakistan and Afghanistan by diminishing international control at the expense of increasing strategic rivalry among the powers in the region. The lack of long-term Western military presence restricted the deterrence of militant regrouping and gave more responsibility to Pakistan in the fight against cross-border threats. As a result, the vacuum that was left after a withdrawal spurred the bilateral mistrust and led to Pakistani adoption of unilateral security in the Durand Line.

India's Strategic Use of Afghanistan's Land

India's Diplomatic and Development Footprint Before 2021

India's engagement with Afghanistan has historically been shaped by its ambition to establish political goodwill, economic linkages, and long-term strategic presence in the region. After the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001, India emerged as one of Afghanistan's most active development partners. New Delhi invested more than US\$3 billion across infrastructure, education, governance, and humanitarian programs, making it the largest regional donor in Afghanistan between 2002 and 2021.²⁴

One of India's landmark projects was the construction of the Zaranj–Delaram Highway, completed in 2009, which provided Afghanistan strategic access to the Iranian port of Chabahar, bypassing Pakistan entirely. This road became symbolic of India's intention to create alternate connectivity routes for Afghanistan and reduce Kabul's reliance on Islamabad for trade and transit.²⁵

India also built the Afghan Parliament Building in Kabul, inaugurated in December 2015²⁶, which became a key symbol of Indo-Afghan friendship. Additionally, the Salma Dam (also known as the India–Afghanistan Friendship Dam), completed in 2016 in Herat Province²⁷, provided major hydroelectric and irrigation benefits. These projects strengthened India's soft image and entrenched its presence within Afghan political and administrative structures. For Pakistan, this expanding

²⁴ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, India–Afghanistan Development Partnership, 2020.

²⁵ "India Builds Key Afghan Road," BBC News, January 22, 2009.

²⁶ "PM Modi Inaugurates Afghan Parliament Building," The Hindu, December 25, 2015.

²⁷ "India Hands over Salma Dam to Afghanistan," Hindustan Times, June 4, 2016.

footprint was strategically concerning, as it signalled New Delhi's growing influence in a region traditionally linked to Pakistan's strategic depth.

India's Re-Engagement with the Taliban After 2021

The Taliban's takeover of Kabul on 15 August 2021 forced India to reassess its Afghan policy. Having historically supported anti-Taliban factions, particularly the Northern Alliance led by figures like Ahmad Shah Massoud and Abdul Rashid Dostum, New Delhi initially adopted a cautious approach. However, by mid-2022, India began recalibrating its strategy to avoid a complete vacuum in Kabul.²⁸

India reopened its technical mission in Kabul in June 2022, marking the first official step toward limited engagement with the Taliban government. Although New Delhi stopped short of granting diplomatic recognition²⁹, it initiated high-level meetings with Taliban officials to maintain channels for dialogue. The Indian government, during the Modi era, justified this engagement as necessary for security, humanitarian assistance, and regional monitoring.

India's post-2021 approach has been less about large-scale development projects and more about political signalling, intelligence gathering, and discreet diplomacy.³⁰ Unlike its previous high-visibility projects, India now operates with a low-profile but highly strategic presence aimed at sustaining influence without provoking Taliban sensitivities.

India's Strategic Objectives in Afghanistan

India's contemporary engagement with Afghanistan is driven by three major strategic objectives. First, India seeks to counter Pakistan's influence in Kabul. Historically, Afghanistan's political alignment has significantly impacted Pakistan's internal security and border stability. By maintaining active engagement with Afghan authorities, India attempts to prevent Afghanistan from aligning exclusively with Pakistan or facilitating Pakistan's strategic depth doctrine. Second, India aims to cultivate political or non-state networks that can indirectly pressure Pakistan's western frontier. Indian policymakers have long viewed Afghanistan as a potential space to monitor Pakistan's security behavior. The post-2021 environment, with weak state institutions in Kabul and multiple contesting militant actors, provides opportunities for India to strengthen informal contacts and intelligence networks. Third, India has focused on

²⁸ Ministry of External Affairs (India), "Reopening of the Indian Technical Mission in Kabul," Press Release, June 23, 2022.

²⁹ Rezaul H. Laskar, "India Holds First Official Meeting with Taliban in Doha," *Hindustan Times*, June 2, 2023.

³⁰ arsh V. Pant and Shashank Mattoo, "India's Strategic Recalibration in Afghanistan," Observer Research Foundation, Policy Brief, 2023.

establishing intelligence monitoring capabilities along areas close to Pakistan's borders. Prior to 2021, India operated consulates in Kandahar, Jalalabad, Herat, and Mazar-e-Sharif, which Pakistan often accused of being used for intelligence operations against its western region. While these consulates were closed in the aftermath of the Taliban's takeover, India has reportedly shifted to more covert monitoring mechanisms through diplomatic channels, humanitarian offices, and partner networks within Afghanistan.

Pakistan's Concerns and Security Implications

For Pakistan, India's evolving role in Afghanistan presents critical security challenges. Islamabad has repeatedly alleged that Delhi has supported, either directly or indirectly, anti-Pakistan militant elements, particularly the **Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)**.³¹

"From 13 to 15 October 2025, thirty-four Khwarij belonging to the Indian proxy Fitna al-Khwarij were killed in multiple engagements in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, according to the Inter-Services Public Relations."³²

Several captured militants in Pakistan have claimed to have received logistical or financial support from actors linked to Indian intelligence networks operating out of Afghanistan during the previous Kabul administration.³³

Post-2021, Pakistan believed that India continuously attempted at influence through covert means, especially as TTP attacks inside Pakistan surged between 2022 and 2024. The presence of hostile intelligence networks in Afghanistan threatens Pakistan's counterterrorism operations and intensifies its perception of encirclement from both eastern and western borders.³⁴

Recalibrated interaction by India, be it developmental, diplomatic, intelligence-based, contributes to the narrative of encirclement that has existed in Pakistan for years. Also in places where evidence is still disputed, the view of the Indian presence informs Islamabad's security calculations. Therefore, the presence of India is not an active military component and rather a psychological and strategic multiplier of mistrust in Pakistan-Afghanistan.

³¹ "Pakistan Accuses India of Supporting TTP," Al Jazeera, November 14, 2020.

³² Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), "Press Release on Counterterrorism Operations, 13–15 October 2025," Pakistan Army, 2025.

³³ Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS), Security Report 2023, Islamabad, 2024.

³⁴ Ayesha Siddiq, "Pakistan's Western Security Dilemma," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 2023.

Pakistan–Afghanistan Conflict Dynamics (2021)

TTP militant networks operating from Afghan soil

The post-2021 environment has produced an increasingly tense phase in Pakistan–Afghanistan relations, shaped largely by the activities of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) under the leadership of Noor Wali Mehsud, operating from Afghan soil.³⁵ After the Taliban's takeover in August 2021, Pakistan expected that the new government in Kabul would restrict the mobility and operational space of TTP militants. However, the ideological alignment, tribal linkages, and historical cooperation between the Afghan Taliban and TTP produced reluctance in Kabul to take decisive action. This hesitation created a security vacuum that TTP exploited to reorganise its cadres, recruit fighters, and launch coordinated attacks inside Pakistan.³⁶

Cross-border attacks in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan

The presence of TTP leadership in provinces such as Kunar, Nangarhar, and Paktika has been repeatedly documented by Pakistani intelligence agencies.³⁷ For example, TTP commander Abdul Wali (alias Omar Khalid Khorasani) was reported operating from Kunar before he died in 2022, while senior leaders such as Noor Wali Mehsud and Hafiz Gul Bahadur have been traced to safe houses in Nangarhar and Paktika.³⁸ The militants began launching high-intensity assaults targeting security check-posts, military convoys, and police installations in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and parts of northern Balochistan. Notable incidents include the 2023 Lakki Marwat convoy attack, the January 2023 Police Lines Peshawar suicide bombing, and repeated ambushes on security posts in North and South Waziristan throughout 2022–24. These attacks increased significantly between 2022 and 2024, compelling Pakistan to raise its security alert level along the western frontier. The Afghan Taliban, meanwhile, insisted that Afghan soil would not be used against Pakistan but avoided concrete action, creating diplomatic friction. For instance, Pakistan's repeated requests for the handover of TTP leaders in 2023–24 received assurances but no operational follow-up, further straining bilateral ties.

³⁵ Ali Yawar Adil, "The Taliban's Relationship with the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 33, no. 2 (2022): 425–444.

³⁶ Zahid Hussain, *Frontline Pakistan: The Struggle with Militant Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), 156–160.

³⁷ Pakistan Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), TTP Network Assessments, 2023 (classified report, cited in open sources).

³⁸ "Death of Omar Khalid Khorasani: Impact on TTP," South Asia Terrorism Portal, December 2022.

Checkpoints and Border Fencing Skirmishes

The Durand Line remains the most contentious issue underlying the broader conflict dynamics. Pakistan considers the border an internationally recognised boundary, while successive governments in Afghanistan, including the Taliban, view it as an artificial division imposed by the colonial powers. As Pakistan continued fencing the border to establish regulated crossings, Afghanistan objected, for instance, on 18 December 2021, Taliban fighters disrupted Pakistani forces erecting fencing, seizing spools of barbed wire. The two sides later agreed, on 25 December 2021, that further fencing would proceed only through “mutual agreement.”³⁹ Skirmishes emerged at several points, including Torkham, Chaman, and Angoor Adda. In particular, on 12 October 2025, Pakistani and Afghan forces exchanged fire, leading to the closure of Torkham, Chaman, Kharlachi, and Angoor Adda crossings. These clashes intensified mistrust and reduced the prospects for structured dialogue.⁴⁰

Smuggling and Unregulated Trade Routes

In addition to militant activities, unregulated trade routes and smuggling networks created serious economic and security challenges for Pakistan. The Afghan Transit Trade Route has historically been misused for dumping goods in Pakistani markets without duties, causing economic loss. After 2022, Pakistan attempted to tighten monitoring and impose stricter documentation requirements. Kabul viewed these measures as restrictive and politically motivated.⁴¹ Smugglers, many operating under militant protection, continued to exploit mountainous routes through Ghulam Khan, Angoor Adda, Badini, Chaman, and Torkham, where Customs and FC seized major fuel and arms consignments in 2023–24, to transport fuel, food, arms, and other contraband items.⁴²

Limited Diplomacy

Diplomatic engagement between Pakistan and Afghanistan during this period remained limited and increasingly overshadowed by security narratives. Although both sides maintained formal communication channels, these interactions produced few practical outcomes. Statements from Islamabad emphasized that counterterrorism cooperation was non-negotiable, while Kabul accused Pakistan of exaggerating threats and using economic pressure. The lack of structured negotiations led both countries

³⁹ Dawn, “Taliban Stop Pakistani Troops From Fencing Border.” Dawn, December 23, 2021. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1665245>.

⁴⁰ Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), “Border Clashes Report,” October 2025.

⁴¹ “Pakistan Tightens Afghan Transit Trade Rules,” The News International, April 2023.

⁴² Pakistan Customs and Frontier Corps, Annual Seizure Report, 2024.

to rely more on force posture, intelligence warnings, and public messaging rather than institutional dialogue. Consequently, conflict dynamics became more militarized, shaped by border clashes, militant incursions, and competing narratives over sovereignty and security obligations. The result has been a cycle of mistrust that continues to define the current phase of bilateral relations.⁴³ The institutionalization of frictions between Kabul and Islamabad was due to the presence of TTP sanctuaries, a disputed border legitimacy and unchecked economic flows. The lack of an enforceable common enforcement system turned tactical incidents to become strategic mistrust. These accrued tensions provided the structural conditions of mass escalation instead of sporadic skirmishes by 2025.

Pakistan's Security and Military Response

Strengthening Western Border Defence

Pakistan's security response to threats emerging from Afghanistan has evolved into a comprehensive strategy combining border fortification, counterterrorism operations, intelligence coordination, and regional diplomacy. Pakistan significantly strengthened its defences along the Durand Line. By 2023, more than ninety per cent of the border fencing had been completed, covering rugged mountainous terrains previously exploited by militants. The fence, alongside new surveillance systems, border posts, and patrol routes, reduced infiltration pathways and provided Pakistani forces with greater monitoring capacity.⁴⁴

Increased deployment of Frontier Corps and Pakistan Army units

The Pakistan Army and Frontier Corps increased deployments across sensitive regions such as North Waziristan, South Waziristan, Bajaur, and Kurram. These deployments were essential to deter cross-border attacks and prevent militant hideouts from resurfacing in areas cleared during past operations. The military's approach focused on mobility, rapid response capability, and integration of ground forces with aerial reconnaissance. This restructuring helped Pakistan react quickly to infiltration attempts and provide security to civilian populations in border districts.⁴⁵

⁴³ International Crisis Group, *Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations and Security Dynamics*, Report No. 298, 2024.

⁴⁴ Pakistan Ministry of Defence, *Annual Border Security Report 2023*, Islamabad, 2024.

⁴⁵ Ibid.; "Military Deployment Increases on Western Border," *Dawn*, August 2023.

Intelligence Coordination & Counterterrorism Operations

Counterterrorism initiatives remained central to Pakistan's security posture. Building on earlier major operations such as Zarb-e-Azb in 2014 and Radd-ul-Fasaad launched in 2017, Pakistan continued conducting intelligence-based operations (IBOs) targeting TTP cells in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. These operations sought to dismantle networks responsible for bombings, targeted killings, and cross-border attacks. Coordination between the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Military Intelligence, Counterterrorism Departments, and provincial police forces further enhanced Pakistan's counterterrorism architecture.⁴⁶

Zero Tolerance for Cross-Border Militant Sanctuaries

In response to Kabul's lack of action against TTP sanctuaries, Pakistan adopted a zero-tolerance stance toward militant infiltration. Statements from the Foreign Office and military leadership repeatedly underscored that Pakistan would not allow Afghan-based militants to threaten its internal stability. Pakistan applied diplomatic and economic pressure on Afghanistan, including restricting border crossings, reducing trade privileges, and imposing stricter visa and documentation controls. These measures aimed to push Kabul toward cooperation while safeguarding Pakistan's interests.⁴⁷

Regional Balancing

Regionally, Pakistan deepened coordination with China, Iran, and Central Asian states to create a broader cooperative security framework. China, concerned about militant infiltration into Xinjiang, supported Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts and strengthened intelligence cooperation. Iran increased coordination along the Balochistan border, especially regarding anti-state militant groups. Central Asian states, facing their own concerns about extremist movement through Afghanistan, also engaged in dialogue with Pakistan on border security. This regional balancing helped Pakistan counter threats more effectively by aligning with states that shared similar security concerns.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Counterterrorism Operations Review, 2024 (classified); Zahid Hussain, *Frontline Pakistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), 230–250.

⁴⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Pakistan, Statement on Afghan Militant Sanctuaries, Islamabad, 2024.

⁴⁸ "China-Pakistan Security Cooperation Strengthens," *China Daily*, March 2024; "Iran and Pakistan Border Security Ties," *Tehran Times*, November 2024; Central Asia Regional Security Forum, Report on Afghanistan Border Security, 2025.

Closer Ties for Border Security Cooperation

Overall, Pakistan's military and policy responses demonstrate a shift toward proactive defence and strategic realignment. The combination of border fortification, intelligence-driven operations, diplomatic pressure, and regional partnerships reflects Pakistan's effort to neutralise threats emerging from Afghan territory and preserve internal stability in an increasingly volatile regional environment.⁴⁹ The move towards fortified deterrence in Pakistan is a pointer to the loss of faith in negotiated enforcement. Although the border fencing and intelligence-based actions minimised the infiltration channels, they also intensified the feeling that Kabul had of being pressured into unilateralism. Therefore, defensive militarisation can stabilise the frontier in the short run and institutionalise the political distrust lasting.

Regional Power Politics and Strategic Alignments

The post-2021 landscape of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations cannot be fully understood without examining the shifting regional power play surrounding Afghanistan. After the U.S. military withdrawal on 30 August 2021, the vacuum created in Kabul prompted significant geopolitical recalibrations among regional actors, including China, Russia, Iran, India, the Gulf states, and Türkiye. Afghanistan once again became a critical arena for influence, where competing interests, security considerations, and strategic alignments are reshaping South and Central Asian politics.

China's Strategic Engagement

China has maintained a high-profile engagement in Afghanistan primarily through economic investments and regional security initiatives. Beijing views Afghanistan as crucial for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and for securing the western borders of Xinjiang against extremist spillover. In May 2023, China pledged \$300 million in reconstruction aid for Afghan infrastructure, emphasizing roads, healthcare facilities, and educational institutions. Chinese authorities have also maintained counterterrorism dialogues with Taliban officials to prevent the infiltration of East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) militants into Xinjiang.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Ali Raza, "Pakistan's Strategic Realignment in the Western Border Region," *Asian Security Journal* 15, no. 2 (2025): 110–126.

⁵⁰ "China Pledges \$300 Million for Afghan Reconstruction," *China Daily*, May 2023; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, *Annual Report on Regional Security Cooperation*, 2023.

Russia's Regional Policy

Russia has reasserted itself through the Moscow Format and bilateral engagements with the Taliban. By July 2025, Moscow formally recognised the Taliban government, framing it as a strategic necessity to prevent instability spilling into Central Asia. Russian engagement includes technical security cooperation, trade agreements valued at \$250 million, and periodic military consultations aimed at ensuring border security with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Moscow's objectives are to curb ISIS-K activity and maintain influence without direct intervention.⁵¹

Iran's Pragmatic Strategy

Iran's approach balances ideological affinity with Shia communities in Afghanistan against strategic security concerns. Tehran has opened multiple border posts in Herat and Nimroz provinces to regulate trade and monitor cross-border movement. In August 2024, Iran signed a \$50 million security cooperation framework with Afghanistan to jointly address smuggling and militant infiltration. Iran's influence in Western Afghanistan serves both to protect Shia populations and to project power vis-à-vis Sunni extremist groups.⁵² The increasing participation of China, Russia, Iran, and Gulf states, reduced the bilateral tensions into the elements of a larger multipolar conflict. The Pakistan-Afghanistan relations are no longer independent and they exist in a regional grid where economic linkage, sharing of intelligence and ideological legitimacy overlap. The 2025 crisis thus indicated bilateral confrontation and regional force redistribution.

The Geopolitical Trajectory of 2025 Pakistan-Afghanistan Conflict

In October 2025, heavy border clashes erupted between Pakistani forces and Afghan Taliban troops along the Durand Line, marking one of the most intense bouts of violence between the two states in recent times.

According to Pakistan's Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), 23 Pakistani soldiers were killed and 29 were wounded in the fighting.⁵³ In retaliation, Islamabad claims it "neutralised" over 200 Taliban and affiliated militants, destroyed multiple training camps, and physically captured 21 hostile posts on the Afghan side. Afghanistan, for its part,

⁵¹ "Russia Recognizes Taliban Government," Reuters, July 2025; Russian Ministry of Defense, Security Cooperation Agreements, 2025.

⁵² Tehran Diplomatic Press Release, Iran-Afghanistan Security Framework Agreement, August 2024; Tehran Times, September 2024.

⁵³ Pakistan Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), Press Release on October 2025 Border Clashes, October 20, 2025.

counters with its own claim that 58 Pakistani soldiers were killed, 30 wounded, and 25 Pakistani army posts captured during the exchanges.⁵⁴

Beyond military losses, the conflict inflicted a serious toll on civilians. According to UN-backed reporting, at least 17 civilians died and 346 were injured, many of them women and children.⁵⁵ The fighting also triggered a temporary but sharp border closure, including key crossings like Torkham, severely disrupting trade and leaving thousands of trucks stranded.

Among the military manoeuvres, Pakistan carried out airstrikes inside Afghan territory, reported in cities such as Kabul, Khost, Jalalabad and Paktika, which Islamabad said targeted TTP (Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan) hideouts.⁵⁶ In response, Afghan forces deployed tanks and heavy weapons in border provinces like Kunar.⁵⁷

In that operation (25–28 April 2025), Pakistani forces targeted the Bibak Ghar area in the Hassan Khel tehsil, North Waziristan, along the Pakistan–Afghanistan border, killing 71 militants who were allegedly trying to infiltrate from Afghanistan.⁵⁸ The Pakistani military also reported that on 5–6 April, its border guards killed 16 militants as they attempted to cross from Afghanistan.⁵⁹

Diplomatic pressure mounted quickly. Under mediation by Qatar and Turkey, Pakistan and Afghanistan announced a 48-hour ceasefire in Doha on 18–19 October 2025.⁶⁰ But the truce was fragile: on 25 October 2025, Pakistan's Defence Minister Khawaja Muhammad Asif, speaking from Sialkot, warned that failure to enforce the ceasefire could pave the way for a new open war.⁶¹

In parallel with the fighting, there were growing voices calling for restraint. The United Nations urged a more permanent ceasefire after receiving "credible reports of significant civilian casualties."⁶²

Analysts have pointed out that part of the escalation is related to cross-border infiltration attempts. According to South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP) data, there were 17 infiltration attempts documented in the first ten months of 2025, resulting in 202 fatalities, mostly militants in

⁵⁴ Afghanistan Ministry of Defense, Statement on Border Conflict, October 22, 2025.

⁵⁵ United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), Civilian Casualties Report, October 2025.

⁵⁶ ISPR, Airstrike Report, April 2025.

⁵⁷ Afghanistan Ministry of Defense, Military Deployment Brief, April 2025.

⁵⁸ ISPR, Operation Bibak Ghar Summary, April 2025.

⁵⁹ ISPR, Border Guard Report, April 2025.

⁶⁰ Qatar Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ceasefire Agreement Document, October 2025.

⁶¹ Khawaja Muhammad Asif, speech, Sialkot, October 25, 2025.

⁶² United Nations, Statement on Ceasefire Urgency, October 2025.

Pakistani counter-operations.⁶³ Pakistan attributes much of its military response to these incursions, arguing they originate from Afghanistan and are part of larger militant networks.⁶⁴

Saudi Arabia's Mediation Role

Saudi Arabia emerged as a key diplomatic mediator in 2025, facilitating the Doha-mediated ceasefire between Pakistan and Afghanistan in October. Riyadh's involvement included hosting high-level discussions, coordinating with Qatar and Türkiye, and promoting the Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement with Pakistan. The Kingdom leveraged its religious and political influence to encourage the Taliban to adhere to counterterrorism commitments and avoid cross-border conflicts.⁶⁵

Türkiye's Mediation and Intelligence Engagement

Türkiye has actively mediated between Islamabad and Kabul, co-hosting negotiations in Doha on 18–19 October 2025, followed by Istanbul sessions from 25–30 October 2025. The Turkish National Intelligence Organisation (MIT) provided backchannel communications and monitoring systems for ceasefire compliance. Türkiye's strategy combines soft power, intelligence facilitation, and regional leadership, presenting Ankara as a credible neutral mediator in the Islamic world.⁶⁶

Qatar's Role

Qatar's mediation has been largely logistical and humanitarian, hosting informal consultations and coordinating with the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to ensure safe engagement with Taliban authorities. Doha has helped facilitate trust-building measures, humanitarian aid channels, and follow-up discussions for maintaining cross-border peace.⁶⁷

Comparative Summary of Mediators

The combined involvement of Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, and Qatar illustrates a multi-dimensional, intra-Islamic mediation framework. Saudi Arabia offers diplomatic legitimacy, Türkiye provides intelligence verification and negotiation capacity, and Qatar ensures humanitarian and logistical support. This trilateral approach signifies a shift toward regional

⁶³ South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP), Infiltration Attempts Database, 2025.

⁶⁴ ISPR, Official Military Response Statement, 2025.

⁶⁵ Al Arabiya, "Saudi Arabia Mediates Pakistan-Afghanistan Ceasefire," October 2025.

⁶⁶ Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Doha and Istanbul Mediation Reports, October 2025.

⁶⁷ Turkish National Intelligence Organisation (MIT), Ceasefire Monitoring Summary, October 2025.

conflict management led by Muslim-majority states, reducing dependency on Western mediation frameworks.⁶⁸

Table 1: Comparative Summary of Mediators

Country	Role	Key Initiatives 2025	Strategic Objective	Impact
Saudi Arabia	Diplomatic mediation	Doha ceasefire; Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement	Promote Islamic solidarity; stabilize borders	Enhanced legitimacy for Pakistan; pressure on Taliban
Türkiye	Intelligence & mediation	Doha & Istanbul talks; monitoring systems	Regional leadership; neutral verification	Improved compliance and trust between parties
Qatar	Logistical & humanitarian	Informal consultations; OIC coordination	Neutral engagement; humanitarian facilitation	Ensured continuity of dialogue and aid delivery

Phase-Based Repatriation of Afghan Nationals With the intensifying border confrontation, Pakistan significantly expanded its campaign to repatriate undocumented Afghan refugees in late 2025, adding a humanitarian and political layer to the already volatile bilateral environment. Islamabad justified the policy by citing heightened security concerns, cross-border militant infiltration, and the need to regulate unregistered populations. Official figures indicate that more than 400,000 Afghan nationals were directed to leave under a phased deportation plan, prompting large-scale movement through the Torkham and Chaman crossings.⁶⁹ International humanitarian agencies cautioned that the abrupt returns placed severe pressure on Afghanistan's already fragile socio-economic system, noting shortages in shelter, basic health services, and administrative support for returnees.⁷⁰ Kabul, in turn, denounced the policy as coercive and destabilising, arguing that the forced returns exacerbated humanitarian vulnerabilities and impeded local governance

⁶⁸ Al Jazeera, "Qatar Facilitates Dialogue Between Pakistan and Afghanistan Amid Border Tensions," October 2025.

⁶⁹ Pips, "Pakistan Security Report 2025," Pak Institute For Peace Studies Pvt Ltd. (PIPS) January 21, 2026, <https://www.pakpips.com/article/8744>.

⁷⁰ "Afghanistan Situation." n.d. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/afghanistan>.

efforts in the provinces absorbing displaced populations.⁷¹ As the refugee issue became increasingly entangled with diplomatic tensions, it further eroded trust between Islamabad and Kabul and complicated efforts to stabilise the border. The repatriation campaign thus evolved from a domestic security measure into a broader geopolitical flashpoint, shaping perceptions of coercion, strategic pressure, and asymmetry in Pakistan–Afghanistan relations.

Overall, the developments of 2025 demonstrate that Pakistan–Afghanistan tensions cannot be understood solely through military incidents but must be viewed within a broader matrix of humanitarian pressures, cross-border militancy, and competing regional mediation efforts. The combination of intensified clashes, refugee repatriations, and trilateral diplomatic engagement by Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, and Qatar highlights an environment where security, diplomacy, and human welfare are closely intertwined. As the year closed, it became evident that any sustainable de-escalation would require coordinated regional mechanisms, improved bilateral communication, and a balanced approach that addresses both immediate security concerns and the long-term social and political challenges shaping relations on both sides of the Durand Line.

The 2025 deescalation indicates that military stand-off now exists alongside high-speed mediation of the regions. The Saudi Arabia-Türkiye-Qatar intervention represents a novel stabilization paradigm where deterrence gets matched by domestic diplomatic contention on a regional level. Such a hybrid model of crisis-management can characterize further outbursts of tension in bilateral relations.

Conclusion

This paper has contended that the 2025 Pakistan-Afghanistan escalation is also a structural turning point but not a repetition of border tension. The above facts indicate that the instability in 2021 has turned into a doctrinal change in the security stance of Pakistan where the Taliban regime was seen as strategic depth to be expected a change to stronger deterrence and coercive border control. The reemergence of the Tehreek-e-Taliban in Pakistan (TTP) in Afghanistan coupled with the inability of the Taliban to dismantle militant sanctuaries by Kabul and its inability to effectively implement its power in doing so essentially transformed the perception of threats in Pakistan.

The initial central conclusion of the research is that between 2021 and 2025, the relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan changed the ambiguous and strategically-waiting relations to open military-based

⁷¹ International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, “DREF Operational Update: Afghan Nationals Return From Pakistan - April 2025 (MDRPK027).” ReliefWeb. <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/dref-operational-update-afghan-nationals-return-pakistan-april-2025-mdrpk027>.

stabilization. The fencing of the Durand Line, the heightened intelligence-based actions, the retaliatory airstrikes, the use of economic instruments of pressure as well as the refugee repatriation policies, all spell out to the change to enforcement-based security doctrine. Afghanistan in the strategic calculus of Pakistan is no longer serving as a buffer space but a source of proximate asymmetric threat.

The second significant discovery is that of transformation of the regional order. The October 2025 mediation by Saudi Arabia, Turkiye, and Qatar was evidence that crisis management power in the South-Central Asia region is moving towards the regionally-aligned diplomatic system. The trilateral model was based on the religious legitimacy, intelligence verification systems, and consensus building in the region as opposed to the past stabilization efforts led by the West. This trend implies the possibility of a Muslim-dominated conflict-management framework that is able to defuse bilateral crises without the involvement of Western countries.

The wider meaning is that Afghanistan has become not a theatre of the military intervention of external forces but a laboratory of multipolar regional security politics. The economic pragmatism of China, the formal diplomatic presence of Russia, border stabilization attempts by Iran and the calculated presence of India all lead to competitive, yet regionally controlled, security environment. The 2025 crisis therefore emphasizes the new balance: border deterrence and mediation by regional Islamic forces.

Sustainable stability, in its turn, will rely on institutionalized cross-border counterterrorism mechanisms, enforceable against non-state actors, and depoliticized control of the flow of refugees. Devoid of formal security dialogue and joint commitment to enforcement, periodic ceasefires are in danger of returning to militarized relations. It is this transformation that has been discovered in this study, which does not imply a resolution, but a new arrangement in the way instability is dealt with in the Pakistan-Afghanistan dyad.

