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AFGHANISTAN–PAKISTAN TENSIONS IN 2025

Border, Insurgency, and Geopolitics



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CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Historical Context	1
Regional Geopolitics & Militancy in the Pashtun Belt	3
Economic Interdependencies between Kabul & Islamabad	5
Recent Developments in 2025	5
Impact on Regional Security and Integration	8
Conclusion	11

Abstract

This paper critically examines the sharp deterioration in Afghanistan–Pakistan relations in 2025, situating it within a broader historical and geopolitical context. Rooted in enduring disputes over the Durand Line and the unresolved Pashtunistan issue, the current escalation has been catalyzed by a resurgence of cross-border militancy, particularly involving the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Pakistan's allegations of militant sanctuaries in Afghanistan and retaliatory airstrikes have coincided with diplomatic breakdowns and trade suspensions. Concurrently, refugee repatriation and Kabul's efforts to diversify trade routes reflect an emerging economic decoupling. These developments are compounded by evolving regional dynamics, including India's expanding engagement with the Taliban government and renewed great power interest in Afghanistan from China, Russia, and the US. The paper argues that the absence of cooperative security mechanisms and sustained bilateral dialogue risks entrenching instability, thereby impeding regional economic integration and amplifying transnational security threats.

Introduction

The relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan has long been fraught with mistrust and volatility. Their shared border, known as the Durand Line, which stretches over 2,600 km, is heavily contested and often a flashpoint for cross-border incursions, smuggling, as well as militant activities and movements. In 2025, Afghanistan–Pakistan ties had deteriorated to their lowest point in years, marked by deadly border clashes, disrupted trade, and a breakdown in diplomacy between the two countries.¹ What began in October (2025) as isolated incidents culminated in heavy fighting along the frontier – “the worst fighting since the Taliban’s 2021 takeover of Kabul” – with dozens killed on both sides.² The collapse of talks mediated by Qatar and Turkey in November 2025 followed weeks of intense violence along the frontier, reflecting deep disagreements over cross-border militancy and the issue of sovereignty. Islamabad accuses Kabul of harbouring sanctuaries for the TTP and other Pakistani insurgent groups, whereas the Taliban government in Kabul denies these charges and puts the blame on Pakistan. The Taliban had also condemned Pakistani airstrikes on Afghan soil and blamed Islamabad for supporting ISKP (Islamic State Khorasan Province), a dreaded (anti-Taliban) extremist group, having a strong presence in Afghanistan. This conflict encompasses multiple dimensions, including contested borders, divergent approaches to militant groups, humanitarian crises, and economic disruptions. Therefore, the following article examines how these 2025 developments – including border tensions, Taliban–TTP relations, trade disruptions, and external pressures – are reshaping Afghanistan–Pakistan relations and what they mean for regional security, economic integration, and great power competition in the region.

Historical Context: The Story of the Durand Line and the Pashtunistan Issue

The roots of the Afghanistan–Pakistan conflict extend back to 1893, when the Durand Line was drawn by the British colonial authorities, cutting through Pashtun tribal lands. This Pashtun population, who share a common cultural code (known as Pashtunwali),

common religion, ethnic, linguistic and familial bonds, a common ideology of resistance and shared historical myths and memories, were divided between Afghanistan and the British India in 1893 (and between Afghanistan and Pakistan post 1947), resulted into their demand for an independent Pashtun territory stretching between the regions historically known as Khurasan and the Indian subcontinent.⁴ Apparently, the Afghan Empire founded by Ahmad Shah Abdali in 1747, controlled the entire Pashtun tribal belt; a part of which is now under the sovereign authority of the state of Pakistan. But the re-territorialisation of the Pashtun land due to the imposition of the Durand Line aggravated the problem surrounding the Pashtuns.⁵ It is estimated that Pashtuns are the majority ethnic group in Afghanistan, making up nearly half (40–45%) of the population of the country, while also constituting the largest minority group in the state of Pakistan. No Afghan government has ever formally accepted this boundary, regarding it as a “colonial relic”⁶ (which divided the ethnic kin) and sometimes reviving claims to Pashtun areas, some of which are now under the control of the Pakistani state. Although Pashtuns are believed to be the plurality ethnic group of Afghanistan (Afghanistan has not conducted a national census since the 1970s onwards due to continuous warfare in the country), however, before the demarcation of the Durand line, it is estimated that they constituted nearly 50–60% of the total population of the country. The successive rulers in Afghanistan and also the general Pashtun population living on both sides of the border have never recognized this line and consider the entire area as the homeland of the Pashtuns. Since it ran through and split several Afghan Pashtun tribes, the Durand Line was rejected by most Afghans at that time and became the basis for what subsequently developed as a sensitive border dispute between Afghanistan and British India and, after 1947, with Pakistan.⁷ It is believed that the Afghan governments who recognised this line accepted it only under duress. Otherwise, even the Taliban regime, directly backed by Pakistan, never recognized the Durand line as the formal boundary between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Aimal Faizi, spokesman of the former Afghan President Hamid Karzai, had once said, “The Durand Line is an issue of historical importance for Afghanistan and any decision on the status of the Durand Line, the de facto

border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, should be taken by the people, and not by the government.”⁸ He further asserted that Ashraf Ghani (former president of Afghanistan) was following the policy of his predecessor, President Karzai, who has long been in favour of the people’s decision on the Durand Line.⁹ Even the current Taliban regime has also seemed to be following the suit of their predecessors. Therefore, it can be stated that the drawing of the border failed to dismantle the age-old traditions, or *riwaj*, of the Pashtuns; instead, these enduring social and cultural practices later provided a foundational basis for the emergence of Pashtun nationalism in the two states. In a way, Pashtun nationalism in both the states and the issue of Pashtunistan (a separate homeland for the Pashtuns) are also closely related to the demarcation of the Durand line.

However, the Pashtuns on both sides of the Durand line, including the Pashtun nationalists and the subsequent Afghan governments, never had/have a single vision of Pashtunistan. The concept of Pashtunistan is ambiguous, as there exist three versions of the same idea known as ‘Pashtunistan’. Despite sharing the same ethnic affiliation, a dichotomy persists between Pashtuns living in the eastern (Pakistan) and western (Afghanistan) parts of the Durand Line, and their perceptions related to the imagined ‘Pashtun nation’. Even among the eastern Pashtuns, there is no consistency in their demand for the desired homeland of the Pashtuns. The majority of Pashtun nationalists in Pakistan view Pashtunistan or Pakhtunkhwa, as an autonomous province within Pakistan, while others aspire for an independent Pashtunistan by merging the Pashtun territories of both modern-day Pakistan and Afghanistan. But the preachers of Pakhtunkhwa, as an autonomous Pakistani province, are also not consistent with their claims of what constitutes the geographic area of the province; as they periodically include the former tribal agencies of FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Regions), KPK (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa), and sometimes also some Pashtun-dominated districts of Balochistan. On the other hand, the ideology of ‘Greater Afghanistan’ or Pashtunistan as an integral part of Afghanistan has been supported and promoted mostly by the Pashtun nationalists residing in the Afghan part of the territory.¹⁰ All these different interpretations of

the same concept have made the Pashtunistan issue viciously complicated.

However, the Pashtunistan issue gained momentum during the period of Pakistan’s independence. Afghanistan also claimed a separate state for the Pashtuns in the year 1946, just before Pakistan’s independence. A referendum was held in this regard in the then North West Frontier Province (currently KPK), the result of which was declared on 20 July, 1947. Here, 289,244 of the participants voted in favour of joining Pakistan, while 2,074 voted for the union with India.¹¹ But the Afghan government protested against the poll result, by citing that firstly, there were no options of merger with Afghanistan or forming an independent or free Pashtunistan state in the referendum proposals as the choice was limited between joining only India or Pakistan, and, secondly, it was just around 50 per cent¹² of the total eligible voters of the province who took part in the plebiscite.¹³ Interestingly, the majority of the Pashtun nationalists in the province, including the ruling Khudai Khidmatgars, boycotted the poll. Owing to this problem surrounding Pashtunistan, Afghanistan also became the only country that opposed Pakistan’s membership in the United Nations after its independence.¹⁴

Since then, the Pashtunistan issue has hindered the cordial relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan in one form or the other till date. Various policies that have been adopted by both the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan are also the result of the issue of Pashtunistan. For example, Pakistan’s support for specific Pashtun Islamist factions in the 1980s (during the period of Soviet intervention in Afghanistan and its subsequent withdrawal from the country) and the Taliban regime during the 1990s were also influenced by the Pashtunistan issue. The Pashtun Islamists, including the Taliban, gave more preference to their religious affiliation rather than the ‘ethnic’ one, which supposedly helped in submerging the demand for an ‘independent Pashtunistan’. This preference that Pakistan gave to the Pashtun Islamists, rather than to the Pashtun nationalists, has led to structural changes in the Pashtun society. On the other hand, in the case of landlocked Afghanistan, access to maritime routes constituted a significant strategic



consideration underpinning Afghan officials' advocacy for an independent Pashtunistan. The disputed territories were viewed as providing a potential outlet to the Arabian Sea via Pakistan's Balochistan province, thereby offering Afghanistan a means to overcome its geographic constraints and reduce dependence on Pakistani transit routes.¹⁵ Thus, it has been observed that the questions concerning the Pashtuns have been instrumentalized by the political elites of both states in order to fulfill their own domestic and geo-strategic interests in the region.

In addition, due to these complexities, Islamabad has always treated the Durand Line as an international frontier and fortified it with barbed wire. Pakistan insists that fencing is necessary to curb smuggling and terrorism, which the Afghan side has repeatedly objected. Pakistan's border fence project, begun in 2016-2017, remains incomplete but contentious.¹⁶ In the last few years, Pakistan erected border fencing (e.g., at Chaman, Torkham, and others), which were torn down by the Afghan guards at times. Such measures, and Pakistan's census teams crossing into border villages, have provoked sporadic clashes – for example, Afghan forces and Pakistani troops exchanged fire near Chaman in 2017 and again in

2018 over security operations.¹⁷ Both sides accuse the other of encroachment, and cross-border skirmishes have periodically flared into deadly exchanges.¹⁸ More recently, a dispute over Pakistan's construction of a border fence along the Durand Line began in 2021 and 2022, leading to mutual animosity and reciprocal accusations of violating each other's sovereignty.¹⁹ In this regard, the Taliban has particularly revived Afghan nationalist positions on long-standing bilateral disputes, particularly its rejection of the Durand Line as an international border.

Regional Geopolitics & Militancy in the Pashtun Belt

In addition, militant insurgencies and regional geopolitics have further strained ties between the two states. During the 1990s, Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) supported the first Taliban regime²⁰ as a strategic ally, as well as to advance its regional objectives vis-à-vis India. New Delhi, on its part, was supporting the Northern Alliance, the Taliban's principal rival during the same period. In the aftermath of 2001, with the Taliban's removal from power, Islamabad formally aligned itself with the U.S.-led intervention in Afghanistan and assumed the role of

a frontline state in the U.S.-headed ‘War on Terror’. However, this overt cooperation was accompanied by a parallel, covert strategy that tolerated—and at times facilitated—the survival of Taliban-linked and other anti-Western militant networks, reflecting a sustained dual-track approach in Pakistan’s Afghanistan policy. Since the 1980s, Islamabad has not only cultivated influence over certain Afghan Islamist factions but also sheltered extremist groups that later turned inward, generating sustained and destabilising violence within Pakistan, particularly in the post-2001 period. The US “War on Terror” era saw Pakistan’s military target selected Al-Qaeda leaders/members and other militants, but it also damaged Islamabad’s covert ties with a few of its militant proxies. Finally, when the U.S. killed Osama bin Laden in Pakistan in 2011 and withdrew fully from Afghanistan in 2021, Pakistan lost credibility with both Washington and its militant partners.²¹ However, things changed between the US and Pakistan after President Donald Trump came back to power for the second time.

Initially, Pakistan publicly welcomed the Taliban’s return to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 and claimed it as a strategic victory. It viewed the Taliban through the long-standing prism of strategic depth—the expectation that a pliant or puppet regime in Kabul would provide Islamabad with security buffers against India, limit Indian influence in Afghanistan, and align closely with Pakistani regional interests. This perception was rooted in decades of historical, ideological, and operational linkages between Pakistani security institutions and segments of the Taliban leadership. However, this anticipated strategic depth failed to materialise in practice. Rather than functioning as a compliant proxy, the Taliban government, unlike in the past, has demonstrated a strong commitment to Afghan sovereignty and strategic autonomy while being open to engaging with other countries, including India, based on mutual interests. Most notably, militant sanctuaries in Afghanistan fuelled a resurgence of the Pakistan Taliban (TTP) and the Baloch insurgent groups since the Taliban’s regaining of power in mid-2021.

TTP – a Pakistan-based militant group separate from the Afghan Taliban – has for decades exploited porous

border regions between Afghanistan and Pakistan, creating havoc for the Pakistani security forces. The initiation of Operation Zarb-e-Azb in its tribal areas in 2014, after multiple attacks in the Pakistani territory by the TTP, drove many of its fighters into eastern Afghanistan.²² It is widely believed that TTP fighters are operating from at least four Afghan provinces bordering Pakistan—Kunar, Nangarhar, Khost, and Paktika—using these areas as bases to plan and launch attacks inside Pakistani territory. It is to be noted that after the overthrow of the Taliban regime from power in 2001, these fighters—many of whom later coalesced into what became the TTP after 2007—provided sanctuary to the Afghan Taliban within Pakistan’s tribal regions, enabling the movement’s survival and regrouping, and reportedly went on to offer military assistance that contributed to the Taliban’s capture of power in Kabul in 2021.²³

Therefore, following the Taliban’s second takeover, the current Afghan interim government did not decisively start cracking down on the TTP; in fact, it initially facilitated negotiations between Islamabad and the TTP in an attempt to broker peace.²⁴ This “middle path” approach reflected the Afghan Taliban’s own networks with Pakistani militants, forged during the insurgency period against the US forces. Afghanistan’s Taliban government, whose own Pashtun base overlaps with that of the TTP, categorically denies harbouring Pakistani militants and treats the TTP as Pakistan’s “domestic issue.”²⁵ Thus, the Taliban’s refusal to act against the TTP reflects both ideological affinities, cross-cultural linkages, and domestic political constraints, undermining Pakistan’s core internal security interests. The TTP capitalized on this ambiguity and launched a wave of attacks inside Pakistan, believing Islamabad would seek a deal rather than escalate the conflict. However, Pakistani officials soon realized that this was a miscalculation, and by late 2022, the fragile truce with the TTP had collapsed, and violence surged again in Pakistan’s tribal areas, which has continued to date. In 2024 alone, militant outfits, especially the TTP and its splinter groups, had reportedly carried out approximately 521 attacks in Pakistan.²⁶ However, the number stands much higher as per the estimates of the TTP. The

trajectory in 2025 points to an even more severe escalation of attacks carried out by the militant group.

Another additional factor in this context is the rise of local militant offshoots like the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) in Pakistan's largest and one of the most resourceful province, Balochistan. Pakistan's Foreign Office statements have categorised TTP and BLA together as groups (labelled as Fitna-al-Khawarij [FaK] and Fitna-al-Hindustan [FaH]²⁷) that Afghanistan must act against.²⁸ The BLA, a separatist movement in Pakistan's Balochistan province, also allegedly operates from its Afghan bases. Therefore, Islamabad interprets the Taliban's reluctance to crack down on any anti-Pakistan insurgency as a breach of trust.

Economic Interdependencies between Kabul & Islamabad

On the economic front, Pakistan has historically occupied a central position in Afghanistan's external trade and connectivity, serving both as its largest trading partner and its most critical transit corridor to global markets.²⁹ For decades, an estimated 40–50 per cent of Afghanistan's imports and exports have transited through Pakistani territory, reflecting Afghanistan's landlocked geography and limited alternative access routes. Afghan exports—particularly perishable agricultural commodities such as fruits, nuts, and, more recently, coal—have traditionally moved southward through key crossings such as Torkham and Chaman, passing via the Khyber Pass to reach Pakistani markets and ports (then it is transported to other countries). In the opposite direction, Pakistan has supplied Afghanistan with essential goods, including rice, wheat, cement, pharmaceuticals, construction materials, and textiles, making bilateral trade vital not only for economic exchange but also for Afghanistan's basic consumption and reconstruction needs.³⁰

Despite this deep structural interdependence, economic ties between the two countries have been repeatedly undermined by political tensions

and regional geopolitics. Historically, Afghanistan–Pakistan relations have been marked by periodic crises in which border closures and transit restrictions were used as instruments of political pressure. During the 1950s and 1960s, for instance, diplomatic disputes over the Durand Line and Pashtun nationalism led to repeated interruptions of Afghan transit through Pakistan, forcing landlocked Kabul to reroute its trade via Iran and the then Soviet Union (presently the Central Asian states). These episodes established a pattern whereby political estrangement translated directly into economic disruption.

Pakistan has consequently wielded significant economic leverage over Afghanistan by virtue of its control over key maritime gateways, notably the ports of Karachi and Gwadar, which have long served as Afghanistan's primary outlets to international markets. However, this leverage has proven to be a double-edged sword. While it has afforded Islamabad strategic influence, it has also rendered bilateral economic relations highly vulnerable to political downturns. Recurrent border closures, customs disputes, and security-driven trade suspensions have eroded trust and incentivised Afghanistan to diversify its transit options toward Iran and Central Asia. In this context, Chabahar port becomes crucial for Afghanistan and its relationship with India.

By 2025, amid escalating security tensions and mutual recriminations, these longstanding vulnerabilities once again came to the fore, with bilateral trade flows suspended and transit routes disrupted. The breakdown underscored how deeply economic engagement between Pakistan and Afghanistan remains hostage to political and security dynamics, limiting the potential of trade to serve as a stabilising force in an otherwise fraught relationship.

Recent Developments in 2025

The year 2025 witnessed a dramatic escalation in Afghanistan–Pakistan tensions. In early October, deadly cross-border clashes erupted as Pakistan's

military reported that dozens of its soldiers were killed from attacks by militant outfits who are given shelter in Afghanistan, while the Afghan side accused Pakistan of bombardments that killed civilians and violated Kabul's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Pakistan's army launched precision strikes and air raids inside Afghanistan, targeting alleged TTP hideouts.³¹ Moreover, on October 10, Pakistani fighter jets carried out airstrikes on civilian market areas in the Margha region of Paktika, near the Afghanistan–Pakistan border, killing innocent civilians.³² The operations were accompanied by violations of Afghan airspace, including over Kabul, triggering strong protests from the Afghan authorities. These incidents heightened bilateral tensions and necessitated urgent diplomatic engagement by both sides to contain escalation and restore a degree of stability to an already fragile relationship. Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid insisted that Kabul will “not allow anyone to use Afghan territory against another country”;³³ while Pakistan's spokesman accused the Afghan authorities of “allowing the use of its soil” by non-state actors against Pakistan and vowed retaliatory strikes if the safe havens were not dismantled.³⁴ The fighting spread by mid-October with heavy exchanges occurred around the Torkham and Chaman border crossings, killing dozens on

both sides, including about 50 Afghan civilians and 23 Pakistani soldiers.³⁵

These clashes culminated into a fragile ceasefire. On October 19, under Qatari and Turkish mediation, Kabul and Islamabad announced a 48-hour truce and the establishment of mechanisms to consolidate lasting peace and stability between the two countries.³⁶ In late October and November, diplomacy intensified. Pakistani and Taliban officials held talks in Istanbul, Turkey, from October 25 to 28 to convert the temporary truce into a permanent solution. However, Pakistan's Defence Minister Khawaja Asif warned that Pakistan could wage “open war” if negotiations fail.³⁷ The talks ultimately ended in a deadlock: Pakistan's delegation insisted on concrete action against militant sanctuaries, while the Taliban demanded respect for Afghan sovereignty and stated that Kabul had “made every effort to hold constructive talks”, but the “Pakistani side does not seem to have this intention.”³⁸ On the other hand, Islamabad accused Kabul of being “irresponsible and non-cooperative” in Istanbul, whereas the Taliban blamed Pakistan for making unrealistic security demands.³⁹ After three rounds of meetings mediated by Qatar and Turkey, no lasting agreement was reached by November. It is further



reported that a Taliban delegation again travelled to Saudi Arabia in December for talks with Pakistani officials, but the negotiations ended without any breakthrough.⁴⁰

Concurrently, trade and transit between the two countries also came to a standstill. Pakistan had closed the Torkham and Chaman crossings during the clashes, stranding goods and people on both sides of the Durand line, hindering the day-to-day activities of the local population. Closure of major border crossings (such as Torkham, closed repeatedly during October and November) underscores how Pakistan can “weaponize geography”⁴¹ – using border control as leverage – to pressurise Kabul. Therefore, the Taliban’s Deputy PM for economic affairs, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, publicly encouraged Afghan traders to “seek alternative routes outside Pakistan.”⁴² He warned the Afghan traders who have existing contracts or purchases in Pakistan a three-month deadline to settle their accounts and end all imports from the country, or otherwise do so at their own risk. He explicitly urged businesses to source imports through Iran, Central Asia, and China rather than Pakistan. Afghanistan’s commerce minister, Nooruddin Azizi also announced on November 12 that Kabul was “working with its northern neighbours to find reliable trade alternatives”.⁴³ In practical terms, Afghan officials are courting Central Asian countries (Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan) to boost trade⁴⁴ and transport links; meanwhile also aim to use Iran’s Chabahar port, which India has helped to develop, as an alternative sea outlet to India and beyond. However, structural challenges abound as Afghanistan’s northern neighbours are also landlocked and impose high tariffs (on Afghan exports), where logistics (of handling, storing) and infrastructure (roads, rail, storage) remain underdeveloped/limited.⁴⁵

By late 2025, the Afghanistan–Pakistan transit trade was effectively suspended, reflecting Islamabad’s stance that trade cannot resume until Kabul acts against anti-Pakistan militants.⁴⁶ For now, the economic impact is clear: Afghanistan pays a steep price. Monthly losses from the closure are estimated in the hundreds of millions of dollars, given that

Afghan trucks have been stranded and imports of food and medicine disrupted.⁴⁷ Pakistani businesses, especially in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, have also protested the trade cutoff, warning of layoffs and lost markets.⁴⁸ Islamabad, by contrast, argues that the economic cost to itself is smaller (as it has access to Iranian and Turkish markets), though losing influence over Afghan markets would weaken Islamabad’s strategic leverage in the country. In the longer term, both countries risk losing trade share, where diplomatic and business leaders caution that every major rupture has historically pushed Afghanistan to diversify its trade and economic relations.

But the broader context of these developments also includes shifting alliances in the region. In May 2025, Pakistan was embroiled in an “India–Pakistan conflict” along the Line of Control (LOC) after the deadly Pahalgam attack in Kashmir, which forced India to launch Operation Sindoor against the terrorist hideouts in Pakistan. In the same month, for the first time, Indian EAM S. Jaishankar held a telephonic conversation with the acting Foreign Minister of the Taliban Interim government, where the latter condemned the Pahalgam attack.⁴⁹ Additionally, the Taliban government also reached out to India: Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi visited New Delhi in October 2025, where India agreed to upgrade its technical mission in Kabul to a full-fledged embassy.⁵⁰ In the succeeding months, a large Taliban trade delegation led by the Commerce Minister visited New Delhi, followed by a visit by the Taliban’s Health Minister— further strengthening India–Afghanistan relations. Pakistan’s suspicion of India’s role in Afghanistan has long been a factor (e.g., Islamabad worries India may use Afghan territory to threaten Pakistan), and India’s recent closeness with the Taliban – Pakistan’s most trusted ally at one time—has complicated Islamabad’s calculations.

It is widely assessed that New Delhi has sought to capitalise on the evolving political context in Afghanistan to expand its strategic footprint, particularly following the October visit of Afghanistan’s acting foreign minister to India, during which he reiterated assurances that Afghan territory would not be used against any

country. In parallel, India extended development and humanitarian assistance—encompassing healthcare, infrastructure initiatives, and educational scholarships—and signalled its intent to resume previously stalled projects while initiating new ones in Afghanistan.⁵¹ India's engagement strategy is multifaceted. It aims to safeguard national security interests, protect its past and ongoing investments, and enhance regional connectivity to Central Asia and beyond, notably through mechanisms such as access to Afghanistan via the Chabahar port⁵² and the prospective TAPI pipeline. Equally important is the emphasis on sustaining long-standing people-to-people ties with the Afghan population.

Pakistan, however, views India's growing engagement with the Taliban as a strategic challenge, alleging that New Delhi seeks to leverage Kabul to undermine Pakistani security—a claim consistently rejected by India. In practical terms, India–Taliban interactions have reached unprecedented levels in the current period. This recalibration carries significant implications for Pakistan: Islamabad fears that any deterioration in Afghanistan–Pakistan relations could facilitate deeper Indian involvement, particularly as India's renewed diplomatic presence underscores its interest in Afghanistan's stability, regional integration, and connectivity.

In sum, 2025 saw a rapid breakdown in Af-Pak relations: a conflagration of border fighting, failure of peace talks, closure of trade routes, and mutual accusations over militancy. Domestic politics in both countries have also played a role in this context. Pakistan's army and government face pressure from militants and opposition factions at home, while the Taliban regime is under strain to prove stability and maintain power in Afghanistan. These acute developments have brought to the fore long-standing issues (borders, insurgency, transit) under new pressures of 2025 geopolitics.

Impact on Regional Security and Integration

The deterioration in Af-Pak relations has far-reaching implications for regional security,

economic integration, and the changing geopolitics surrounding the region:

Regional Security: A principal and immediate concern is the prospect of renewed instability along Pakistan's western frontier. Long-standing insurgencies—most notably those involving the TTP and the BLA—appear to have been emboldened by the deterioration in relations, exacerbating an already volatile security environment in the region. Pakistani security forces, stretched by persistent violence in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, now also confront heightened risks of cross-border exchanges of fire and militant infiltration. Such border skirmishes carry the potential to escalate into a broader conflict, with the attendant risk of drawing in neighbouring states or involving non-state external actors.

Broadly speaking, the situation underscores the international dimensions of Afghanistan's security. As Pakistani officials themselves have acknowledged, threats to Afghanistan and Pakistan's stability are neither in the interest of the Afghan population nor of the neighbouring states.⁵³ This recognition points to a growing, if uneasy, consensus among regional actors that sustained Afghanistan–Pakistan hostilities generate negative spillovers that imperil collective security across the wider region.

In addition, humanitarian and migration dynamics have become closely intertwined with this volatile security landscape. Since 2023, and more forcefully during 2024–2025, Pakistan has increasingly instrumentalised Afghan refugee repatriation as a means of exerting pressure on the Taliban administration in Kabul. Although Pakistan has hosted millions of Afghan refugees for decades, Islamabad has reframed their continued presence as a security, economic, and administrative burden. Large-scale deportation drives, targeting both the documented and the undocumented migrants, resulted in the return of hundreds of thousands of Afghans by 2025, often under conditions characterised by legal uncertainty and humanitarian vulnerability. While officially justified on domestic security and economic grounds, the timing and

scope of these measures suggest a deliberate effort to leverage Pakistan's control over Afghan refugee populations to influence Taliban behaviour. In this context, the deportation of refugees emerged as a coercive yet relatively low-cost policy instrument, enabling Pakistan to impose tangible pressure without escalating to overt military confrontation against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.⁵⁴

However, for Kabul, the consequences have been severe. An economy already weakened by sanctions, aid suspension, and institutional fragility has struggled to absorb large numbers of returnees. The influx has exacerbated unemployment, strained housing and basic services, and heightened the risk of social unrest, thereby undermining the Taliban's claims of restoring stability and effective governance.⁵⁵ Diplomatically, repatriation has also served as a signalling mechanism, reinforcing Pakistan's role as a critical stakeholder in Afghanistan's stability, transit access, and regional connectivity, while conveying that continued inaction on cross-border militancy would have direct societal costs.

Moreover, deteriorating humanitarian conditions in Afghanistan may ultimately generate destabilising spillovers for Pakistan and beyond, including renewed displacement, informal cross-border movement, and radicalisation. Continued instability in Afghanistan heightens concerns in Central Asian states such as Uzbekistan and Tajikistan about militant spillovers and the expansion of narcotics trafficking across porous borders. Despite Pakistan's deportation efforts, renewed violence may also trigger fresh refugee flows toward Pakistan and Iran. Taken together, these dynamics illustrate how the Afghanistan–Pakistan rift can evolve into a broader regional challenge, undermining security, humanitarian stability, and prospects for meaningful regional integration.

In addition, while formal trade between Afghanistan and Pakistan has ceased due to border closures, informal trade and smuggling networks—particularly in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa—have expanded significantly. This surge in illicit economic activity has resulted in considerable revenue losses

for both governments, marginalization of legitimate traders, and adverse effects on the local population. The proliferation of corruption associated with these smuggling networks has further exacerbated governance challenges, producing destabilizing consequences across the broader region.

Economic Integration: The deepening Afghanistan–Pakistan rift has significantly undermined prospects for regional economic integration, particularly by constraining the viability of ambitious cross-border infrastructure initiatives. Flagship projects such as the proposed 647-kilometre Trans-Afghan railway—intended to link Uzbekistan with Pakistan⁵⁶—and the CASA-1000 electricity transmission project, which envisages the export of surplus hydropower from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Pakistan via Afghanistan, are critically dependent on a stable and cooperative Afghanistan–Pakistan relationship. But continuous border closures, political mistrust, and security volatility have heightened investor uncertainty in the region. As analysts note, when geography is effectively “weaponised,” financiers in regional capitals such as Tashkent or Beijing are compelled to factor in elevated political and security risks.

For the landlocked republics of Central Asia, these disruptions complicate long-standing aspirations for access to maritime trade routes, potentially forcing a strategic recalibration toward alternative corridors through Iran or China. Afghanistan, meanwhile, faces the imperative of diversifying its trade partnerships—toward Iran, and Central Asia—to avert deeper economic isolation and collapse. However, severe infrastructure deficits constrain this diversification, rendering Afghanistan heavily dependent on external financing and sustained regional cooperation to develop rail and road networks across difficult and often insecure terrain.

Pakistan's economy has also borne tangible costs from the disruption of bilateral trade. Domestic merchants and consumers lose access to relatively inexpensive Afghan imports, including fruits and coal, while Pakistani exporters relinquish established markets. Over the medium term, Islamabad may

seek alternative transit routes to Central Asia, potentially via Iran or through large-scale energy and connectivity projects. Nevertheless, such initiatives are politically contingent and unlikely to yield immediate economic relief.

Great Power Stakes: From the perspective of major powers, a prolonged deterioration in Afghanistan–Pakistan relations carry significant strategic consequences. In 2025, the foreign ministers of China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan reached a consensus to deepen cooperation under the Belt and Road framework to advance the extension of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) into Afghanistan⁵⁷ and strengthen regional connectivity through enhanced infrastructure development. Therefore, for China, sustained instability along the Af–Pak frontier constitutes a setback to its broader Belt and Road Initiative, which relies on regional connectivity and predictable security environments. In short, Beijing has sought to engage both Kabul and Islamabad in the interest of regional stability⁵⁸ and the protection of its investments and acted as the mediator in resolving the Afghanistan–Pakistan tensions.

For the US and its NATO partners, the evolving crisis underscores a persistent strategic reality. Despite the termination of their direct military presence, Afghanistan continues to generate significant regional and transnational security risks. The continued presence of Al-Qaeda and ISKP (as per the UN Security Council reports) illustrates that Afghanistan remains a permissive environment for militant networks capable of destabilising not only South and Central Asia, but also the broader international security architectures.⁵⁹

Against this backdrop, Western policymakers face a complex strategic dilemma. On the one hand, cooperation with Pakistan remains central to counterterrorism objectives, given Islamabad’s intelligence capabilities, geographic proximity, and historical role in facilitating or constraining militant networks in the region. On the other hand, growing concerns persist regarding Pakistan’s selective counterterrorism policies, its inability—

or unwillingness—to decisively dismantle certain militant groups, and its chronic domestic governance challenges, including political instability, economic fragility, and civil–military tensions. These factors complicate Pakistan’s reliability as a long-term counterterrorism partner and raise questions about the sustainability of existing engagement frameworks.

At the systemic level, these developments are being closely monitored by major powers, notably the US and Russia, both of which remain alert to Afghanistan’s potential re-emergence as an arena of great-power competition. While neither seeks large-scale military re-engagement, Afghanistan’s strategic location—at the intersection of South Asia, Central Asia, and West Asia—continues to imbue it with geopolitical significance. Shifts in diplomatic recognition, security postures, and strategic signalling thus carry implications beyond the Afghan theatre. Recent developments reflect this recalibration. U.S. President Donald Trump’s repeated public references to Bagram Air Base,⁶⁰ Afghanistan’s largest and most strategically significant military facility, signal a lingering American interest in the site’s geostrategic value, particularly in relation to China, Central Asia, and its regional surveillance capabilities. Simultaneously, Russia’s decision to extend formal recognition to the Taliban 2.0 regime—making it the only country⁶¹ to do so thus far—highlights Moscow’s willingness to pursue a pragmatic, interest-driven approach to Afghanistan; one that is aimed at securing influence, managing regional security spillovers, and positioning itself as a key diplomatic interlocutor in Kabul.

Taken together, these dynamics indicate that Afghanistan, far from receding into strategic irrelevance after the US withdrawal, is once again acquiring salience within the new-emerging great-power calculations. The interplay between militant threats, regional instability, and external power interests suggests that Afghanistan will remain an enduring variable in global security and geopolitical competition rather than a closed chapter of post-US withdrawal international politics.

Conclusion

To conclude, the deterioration of Afghanistan–Pakistan relations in 2025 underscores the persistence of deeply rooted structural tensions that have long shaped interactions between the two neighbours. As this study has demonstrated, the current crisis is not an isolated disjuncture but the culmination of historical disputes over the Durand Line, contested Pashtun identities, asymmetric power relations, and mutually reinforcing security dilemmas. The resurgence of cross-border militancy—particularly involving the TTP and allied insurgent groups—has emerged as the most immediate catalyst for confrontation, exposing the limits of Pakistan’s long-standing expectations of strategic depth and the Afghan Taliban’s unwillingness or inability to decisively act against anti-Pakistan militants operating from the Afghan soil.

The events of 2025 also reveal how security tensions have a spilled-over effect on the humanitarian and economic domains. The weaponisation of geography through border closures, the suspension of trade and transit, and the instrumentalisation of Afghan refugee repatriation have intensified pressures on an already fragile Afghan economy, while simultaneously undermining Pakistan’s own regional economic and geo-strategic interests.

Rather than serving as a stabilising force, economic interdependence has remained hostage to political mistrust and security imperatives, reinforcing cycles of disruption and retaliation. At the same time, the breakdown of diplomatic engagement—despite mediation by regional and extra-regional actors—highlights the absence of viable conflict-management mechanisms capable of addressing core grievances between the two countries.

Beyond the bilateral relationship, the Afghanistan–Pakistan conflict also carries significant regional and global implications. It complicates prospects for South and Central Asian connectivity, threatens the feasibility of major infrastructure projects, and heightens concerns about militant spillovers into other regions. Moreover, it intersects with shifting great-power dynamics, drawing the attention of China, Russia, and the US, each of which views Afghanistan through a distinct strategic lens. Ultimately, the 2025 crisis demonstrates that without a fundamental recalibration of security approaches—one that prioritises cooperative counterterrorism, economic pragmatism, and regional diplomacy—Afghanistan–Pakistan relations are likely to remain a source of instability. The trajectory ahead will therefore be critical not only for bilateral peace but also for the broader regional order. •

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