



A Proxy No More? Pakistan, the Taliban, and the Collapse of a Patron–Proxy Model

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Executive summary

This special report examines the sharp escalation in Taliban–Pakistan tensions, which reached their highest point in October 2025 with cross-border airstrikes, drone attacks, and heavy clashes. While the crisis is rooted in long-standing mistrust linked to the unresolved Durand Line and conflicting narratives around militancy, the depth of hostility emerging—after the Taliban’s return to power—within what had long been viewed as a patron–proxy relationship is striking.

Since 2022, Pakistan has carried out repeated strikes across multiple Afghan provinces, killing dozens of civilians, many of them women and children. The 9 October 2025 airstrikes were a decisive turning point, redefining the proxy-based alignment and accelerating the slide toward confrontation. The Taliban responded with retaliatory fire, assertive political messaging, and strong public condemnation. Despite mediation attempts by Qatar, Turkey, and later Saudi Arabia, ceasefire agreements repeatedly failed. Political rhetoric further inflamed tensions, underscoring the rapid deterioration of engagements on both sides. Civilians suffered the most. Yet regional and international reactions remained muted due to geopolitical considerations and the Taliban’s diplomatic isolation. The escalation carried significant political consequences: inside Afghanistan, the Taliban appeared to gain tacit public support as defenders of sovereignty, and anti-Pakistan sentiment surged across society. In Pakistan, the crisis exposed internal vulnerabilities, including rising TTP attacks and growing anti-Afghan sentiment—particularly targeting refugees. This situation opened space for other militant groups to expand operations and exploit weak control on both sides of the frontier.

The report concludes that without a structured border-management mechanism, sustained diplomacy, and credible commitments from both sides—grounded in a representative and recognized Afghan government and Pakistan’s transparent intentions and constructive neighborly behavior—the Durand Line will remain a persistent flashpoint. In the interim, preventing further escalation will require prioritizing civilian protection, adopting non-military approaches, and strengthening regional cooperation to keep the crisis from evolving into a wider destabilizing conflict.

Historical context

The Durand Line, drawn in 1893 during the British “Great Game,” remains one of the most contested borders in the region. The Line was meant to define spheres of influence, not to create a permanent international boundary. Over time, British authorities and later Pakistan treated it as a settled frontier. The Line cuts roughly 2,640 kilometers through Pashtun and Baluch areas, dividing



Photo 1: the Durand Line

communities and long-standing social and economic networks. When Pakistan was created in 1947, Afghanistan was the only country to vote against its admission to the United Nations, rejecting Pakistan's claim to inherit the colonial border. Pakistan argued that the Durand Line remained legally valid, ([Omran](#), 2018). Afghan leaders disagreed, saying the treaty was imposed and never accepted by the Afghan people. As a result, the border has remained unresolved and politically sensitive. International actors treat it as a *de facto* boundary but avoid formal endorsement. Historical narratives also diverge sharply. Pakistani writers such as [Malik Amir Muhammad Khan](#) (2025) describe Pakistan as a stabilizing neighbor that has supported Afghanistan during conflicts and displacement. Afghan and post-colonial scholars tell a very different story, emphasizing colonial coercion and ethnic division. They argue that the Durand Line represents an imposed separation that continues to affect communities today ([Kaura](#), 2017; [European Foundation for South Asian Studies](#), 2018). For Pakistan, the Line is a security necessity; for Afghanistan, it is an unhealed colonial legacy. Beyond the debate over legitimacy, the Durand Line has long been a center of insecurity. The rugged terrain allows armed groups, smugglers, and displaced families to move easily across both sides. Since 2001, Pakistan has accused Afghanistan of allowing Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) fighters to operate from Afghan soil, while Afghanistan has accused Pakistan of supporting the Afghan Taliban to shape Afghan politics ([Jafeer & Saeed](#), 2020). These accusations have fueled mistrust and periodic retaliation. From 2001 to 2021, the border became a low-intensity conflict zone marked by shelling, airstrikes, and armed clashes in various Afghan provinces such as Khost, Paktika, Kunar. Pakistan's frontier-fencing project, launched in 2017, further militarized the frontier and was widely criticized inside Afghanistan for attempting to formalize a disputed boundary and disrupting movement and livelihoods ([Samim](#), 2024).

Today, the Durand Line is best understood as a zone of chronic insecurity, shaped by colonial history, competing narratives, and the presence of multiple armed groups. This report does not address its legal status but recognizes that the frontier remains a persistent flashpoint for cross-border violence, insurgent movement, and humanitarian harm especially in the context of Taliban–Pakistan tensions.

From low-intensity friction to open escalation (2021–2025)

Since the Taliban returned to power in August 2021, the Durand Line has once again become one of the most volatile regional fault lines. Although both sides repeatedly pledged cooperation against cross-border militancy, mistrust quickly deepened. Pakistan accused the Taliban of harboring TTP militants, while the Taliban accused Pakistan of enabling the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) and other groups. Both governments publicly denied these claims, but their past behavior reinforced mutual suspicion. This mistrust has shaped the post-2021 period. For two decades, Pakistan supported the Taliban insurgency against the former Afghan republic, motivated partly by fears over Kabul's ties with India. Now, in a reversal, the Taliban accuse Pakistan of the same "double game" once directed at them. On the surface, the clashes appear to stem from the absence of clear border-management mechanisms. In reality, they reflect Pakistan's frustration with the Taliban's unwillingness to deliver the expected obedience and strategic depth. As a result, accusations between the two sides have repeatedly escalated into confrontations that primarily harm civilians. Below, I outline a brief overview of the trajectory of the key incidents and attacks.

a) April 2022: the first major escalation

While it is difficult to pinpoint exactly when the escalation began, the first major surge occurred in April 2022. According to [Al Jazeera](#), Pakistani airstrikes in Khost and Kunar provinces killed at least 47 civilians—including many women and children displaced from Waziristan—and injured 22 others. Pakistan claimed the strikes targeted TTP fighters following the killing of seven Pakistani soldiers. The Taliban rejected the explanation and condemned the attacks as a direct violation of Afghan sovereignty. Protests erupted in Khost, and analysts noted that Pakistan's strikes were not only military actions but political signals of frustration ([Torelli](#), 2022). These attacks became one of the deadliest cross-border incidents of the year.

b) March 2024: renewed strikes on Khost and Paktika

In March 2024, Pakistan carried out new airstrikes on Afghan territory. Reports by [Hussain](#) (2024a) and [Reuters](#) said the attacks killed at least eight civilians—five women and three children—in Khost's Spera district and Paktika's Barmal district. Pakistan described the operation as an "intelligence-based counterterrorism strike," again linking it to TTP activity. The Taliban responded with heavy weapons along the border, summoned Pakistan's envoy in Kabul, and warned of "serious consequences." UNAMA later confirmed the civilian toll in its [January–March 2024 Human Rights Update](#), documenting additional casualties during armed clashes the same day in Paktia's Dand-e Patan district.

c) December 2024: major civilian casualties in Paktika

On December 24, 2024, Pakistan again launched airstrikes, this time in Paktika province. According to [Hussain](#) (2024b), at least 46 civilians were killed. The Taliban called the attack a "cowardly act" and warned of retaliation. The strikes occurred only hours after a Pakistani envoy's visit to Kabul, fueling suspicions that diplomacy had become a cover for military action. Pakistan did not issue an official comment, but the timing coincided with a surge in TTP attacks that had killed 16 Pakistani soldiers. Once again, Afghan civilians paid the price for Pakistan's internal security crisis.

d) August 2025: drone strikes in Nangarhar and Khost

In August 2025, Pakistani drones reportedly conducted new strikes in Nangarhar and Khost. TOLOnews reporting by [Ghorzang](#) (2025) said three children were killed and five others injured in Khost's Spera district, while six civilians were wounded in Nangarhar's Ghanikhel district. Taliban officials blamed Pakistan directly, saying the attacks caused significant human and financial losses. These incidents mirrored earlier operations in Paktika's Barmal district, which had already caused dozens of civilian deaths.

e) *October 2025: from Kabul drone strikes to open clashes*

Tensions peaked in October 2025. On October 9, Pakistan launched drone strikes in Kabul, reportedly killing two senior TTP members and targeting the group's leader, Noor Wali Mehsud ([Khattak](#), 2025). The Taliban condemned the attack as a severe breach of sovereignty. The same day, Pakistan also struck civilian areas in Paktika, including a local market. Days later, the TTP leader appeared in a video from inside Pakistan, asserting that he was alive and that his



Photo 2: Taliban forces mobilizing toward the Durand Line during retaliatory operations.

movement does not rely on foreign soil to fight the Pakistani state. The timing raised questions, as these strikes occurred only days after a major TTP attack that killed 11 Pakistani soldiers and during the Taliban Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi's official visit to India. Within 48 hours, fighting spread across multiple frontier points. According to [Radio Mashaal](#) and [Radio Azadi](#) (2025), the Taliban claimed to have killed 58 Pakistani soldiers while losing 9 of their own. Pakistan reported killing more than 200 Taliban soldiers and losing 23 personnel. Border crossings shut down, and diplomatic channels froze. Regional states, including Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, called for restraint.

f) *October 15–18, 2025: drone strikes on Kabul and Spin Boldak*

On October 15, [Afghanistan International](#) (2025a) reported new Pakistani drone strikes in Kabul's District 4, killing at least five civilians and injuring 35. Hours later, a ceasefire was announced. [UNAMA](#) confirmed widespread civilian harm. Spin Boldak was the hardest hit: 17 civilians killed and 346 injured. Additional casualties occurred in Paktika, Paktia, Kunar, and Helmand. The ceasefire did not hold. On October 17, Pakistani strikes on Urgun and Barmal districts killed at least ten civilians, including women, children, and three Afghan cricketers traveling home ([The Print](#), 2025). Afghanistan withdrew from the upcoming cricket Series in Pakistan in protest. Analysts ([TOLnews](#), 2025a) questioned whether Pakistan's repeated strikes on populated areas violated international humanitarian law and constituted potential war crimes.

g) *November 2025: border fire and new airstrikes during ceasefire talks*

Despite ongoing negotiations in Istanbul and Saudi Arabia, cross-border fire on November 6, 2025, killed at least five Afghan civilians—four women and one man—and injured six more in Spin Boldak ([France](#) 24, 2025; [Mujahid](#), 2025). Each side blamed the other for starting the exchange. Then, on 25 November, Pakistan again conducted airstrikes in Khost province, killing a woman and nine children ([DW](#), 2025). This incident underscored not only the fragility of ceasefire efforts but also Pakistan's growing frustration with the Taliban's increasing independence and their refusal to conform to the strategic expectations Pakistan had cultivated during the insurgency.

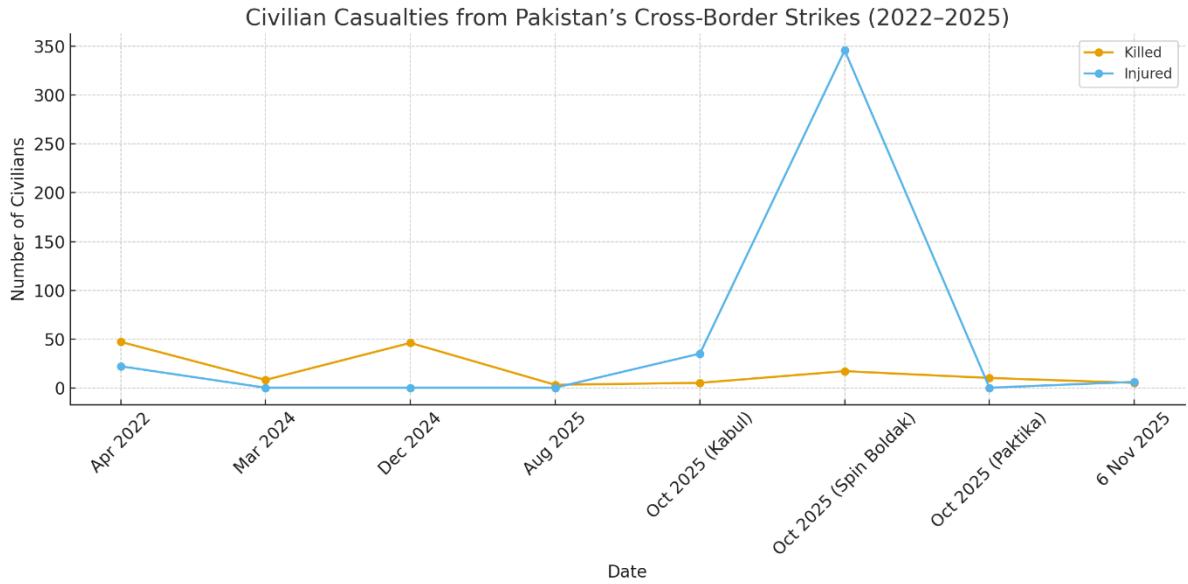


Figure 1: The chart shows that civilians were repeatedly caught in the middle of military escalation, often with no warning, no protection, and no avenues for accountability.

Regional and international responses

The regional and international reaction to Pakistan's repeated strikes inside Afghanistan was limited and often muted. Although Pakistan's actions caused significant civilian casualties, violated Afghan sovereignty, and escalated the conflict, most governments avoided direct criticism. This cautious response reflected geopolitical calculations, long-standing ties with Islamabad, and the absence of a recognized Afghan government capable of mobilizing diplomatic support.

a) Silence, double standards, and selective outrage

Despite mounting civilian deaths in Afghanistan, no state condemned Pakistan's actions. Countries that often portray themselves as Taliban partners—including China, Russia and Iran—issued only generic calls for restraint. Statements by [Tasnim News Agency](#) (2025), [The Tribune](#) (2025), the [Saudi Press Agency](#) (2025), and [TOLOnews](#) (2025b) emphasized the need for dialogue but avoided addressing accountability or civilian protection. The United Nations also refrained from direct condemnation. The lack of recognition for the Taliban government made it diplomatically easier for states and institutions to overlook clear violations of Afghan sovereignty. For Pakistan—which maintains close ties with many regional and Western actors—this silence amounted to implicit permission to continue operations with little reputational cost. The contrast was striking. When a [high-precision Israeli strike targeted Doha](#), Qatar swiftly mobilized the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and heads of state and secured strong diplomatic condemnation—Pakistan included. Yet when Afghan civilians were killed, regional and Islamic states did not respond with comparable urgency or moral clarity. This inconsistency highlighted a broader pattern of selective outrage shaped by political alignment rather than principle.

Afghanistan's diplomatic isolation played a central role in shaping this response. With no internationally recognized government and limited engagement channels, Afghanistan had no effective mechanism to rally support, challenge Pakistan's narrative, or secure international scrutiny.

b) Mediation efforts and ceasefire diplomacy

While India condemned Pakistan directly, several regional actors attempted to defuse the crisis. Qatar, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia played an active role in pushing for a ceasefire and facilitating dialogue. Qatar hosted early rounds of negotiation and announced that the Taliban and

Pakistan had agreed to an immediate ceasefire ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Qatar](#), 2025). Turkey later hosted follow-up discussions on October 25, focused on a border mechanism and crisis-management channels ([Mishra](#), 2025). In early December, Saudi Arabia again hosted both sides for talks, but no agreement was reached ([The Diplomat](#), 2025). However, Pakistan violated the ceasefire almost immediately. According to [News On Air](#) (2025), within hours of the 48-hour truce expiring on October 18, Pakistani aircraft struck Paktika again, killing civilians—including Afghan athletes. These violations weakened diplomatic efforts and signaled Islamabad's willingness to continue unilateral military actions even during ongoing talks. Pakistan's political posture shifted further when its defense minister publicly referred to Afghanistan as Pakistan's "top enemy," warning of possible open war if negotiations failed ([Al Jazeera](#), 2025; [The National Bulletin](#), 2025). Such statements further undermined trust and added fuel to the escalating conflict.

Political and security ramifications

Pakistan's recent military actions and the Taliban's forceful response produced far-reaching consequences for both sides. What began as a series of cross-border strikes developed into a political, social, and security crisis that reshaped public perceptions, strengthened certain actors, and shifted the strategic landscape along the Durand Line.

a) A strategic miscalculation by Pakistan

For decades, Pakistan believed that the Taliban—whom it supported during the insurgency—would naturally align with its security interests after 2021. That expectation proved incorrect. The airstrikes, heavy shelling, and political pressure only pushed the Taliban to assert independence more aggressively. By striking Afghan territory, Pakistan unintentionally strengthened the Taliban's nationalist narrative. The Taliban gained political space to present themselves as defenders of Afghan sovereignty. Anti-Pakistan sentiment across Afghanistan surged, even among groups previously critical of the Taliban. Domestically in Pakistan, the escalation offered temporary political relief by shifting public attention away from state failures and rising insecurity. But strategically, it was a miscalculation: Pakistan now faced a hostile Taliban government with growing regional ties, especially with India.

b) Taliban legitimacy and the rally-around-the-flag effect

Inside Afghanistan, Pakistan's strikes triggered a powerful wave of national sentiment. For many Afghans, regardless of political orientation, defending the country against foreign attack overshadowed internal disagreements with the Taliban. This resulted in increased public sympathy for the Taliban, reduced scrutiny of the Taliban's internal policies, and isolation of anti-Taliban groups who appeared indifferent or even aligned with Pakistan. Many Afghans, especially on social media and in diaspora circles, labeled such opposition groups as "Pakistan's assets." At a moment when the Taliban became under pressure to prove they were not Pakistan's proxy, responding forcefully became a way to demonstrate independence and national authority. Failing to respond would have signaled weakness to their supporters and to the population. Their military response therefore became closely tied to national dignity, significantly boosting their domestic legitimacy and reinforcing their image as the sole actor capable of defending Afghan soil.

c) Implications for Pakistan's internal security

Pakistan entered the escalation at a significant moment. Its relationship with India was deteriorating. Internal insurgent activity, especially from TTP, was rising. Public confidence—particularly in the tribal regions of KPK and Baluchistan—was weakening in the country's security institutions. Opening another front with Afghanistan stretched Pakistan's military and political bandwidth. Moreover, the Taliban's alleged refusal to act against TTP reflected a fundamental divergence between the two sides. This left Pakistan exposed to increased attacks while simultaneously being pulled into a volatile standoff

along the Durand Line. In this environment, Pakistan's escalation risks fueling greater domestic instability. The attempt to portray Afghanistan as the source of Pakistan's insecurity may help the government but does little to address structural failures in counterterrorism and governance.

d) A parallel battlefield: media and narrative escalation

The escalation was not confined to military actions; it spilled forcefully into the rhetorical sphere. Both countries used social media, official statements, and state-aligned media networks to shape public opinion and mobilize support. Key features of this media conflict included competing casualty claims, weaponized narratives, emotional rhetoric and dehumanizing language, and disinformation spreading through local networks and diaspora communities. The "Tora Bora" (Asif, 2025) and "authority limited to a tweet" (Afghanistan International, 2025b) exchange between Pakistan's defense minister and the Taliban's spokesperson exemplified this shift. Such narratives hardened public opinion and reduced the political space for compromise. This narrative escalation was arguably the most lethal. It entrenched hostility, inflamed public emotion, and pushed both sides into positions that became harder to walk back.

 Khawaja M. Asif 
@KhawajaMasif

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While on the request of brotherly countries who were persistently being beseeched by Taliban Regime, Pakistan indulged in talks to give peace a chance, venomous statements by certain Afghan officials clearly reflect the devious and splintered mindset of Taliban regime. Let me assure them that Pakistan does not require to employ even a fraction of its full arsenal to completely obliterate the Taliban regime and push them back to the caves for hiding. If they wish so, the repeat of the scenes of their rout at Tora Bora with their tails between the legs would surely be a spectacle to watch for the people of the region. It is sad to see how the Taliban regime is blindly pushing Afghanistan into yet another conflict, just to retain its usurped rule and maintain the war economy that sustains them. Despite fully knowing their inherent limitations and hollowness of their war cries, they are beating the war drums to maintain their crumbling facade. If the Afghan Taliban regime is madly hellbent upon ruining Afghanistan and its innocent people once again then so be it.

Photo 3: Excerpt from the tweet posted by Pakistan's Defense Minister.



Photo 4: Taliban commends political analysts who publicly supported its stance during the Pakistan confrontation

A shifting strategic landscape for both sides

All these dynamics reshaped the Taliban-Pakistan relationship in ways that may prove lasting. The Taliban emerged more confident politically and militarily. Pakistan inadvertently weakened its influence in Taliban-ruled Kabul. Public sentiment on both sides hardened, making diplomacy more difficult. The regional environment became more complex, with India, Iran, Russia, and China recalibrating their approaches. Insurgent groups gained new opportunities as patron-proxy coordination collapsed. The crisis demonstrated that traditional assumptions about leverage, proxies, and influence no longer hold. Both countries now operate in a new strategic reality—one shaped by rising mistrust and open confrontations, empowered militant actors, and a fundamentally volatile Durand Line.

a) Conflict as an opportunity for armed groups

The escalation can create new space for insurgent and militant groups operating along the Durand Line. This risk becomes even more evident when either side—and especially when both—begin enabling or empowering other militant factions against each other, opening opportunities for recruitment, expansion, and wider cross-border maneuverability. When "the dust is in the air," these groups expand influence. TTP has become increasingly capable and active, with the potential to intensify its operations while exploiting these tensions. ISKP, which is reportedly active on both sides, capitalizes on local grievances and leverages its urban and rural networks to carry out attacks across both Afghanistan and

Pakistan. Other dormant groups may also reemerge under rising instability. These dynamics raise the risk of a multi-layered conflict environment in which state forces, insurgent networks, and regional powers become increasingly entangled.

b) Shifting alignments and potential proxy dynamics

A key driver of the current instability is the shifting political alignment between the Taliban and Pakistan. Former allies are increasingly drifting apart. The Taliban are seen to be warming toward India through humanitarian, economic, and limited diplomatic channels. Pakistan has tacitly shown openness to interacting with anti-Taliban Afghan groups, including political dissidents and exile factions. These developments carry major implications. Once proxy channels open, even informally, they are difficult to reverse. Pakistan has strategically and historically used Afghan jihadi and insurgent factions for strategic purposes. The current environment risks a return to that logic. Possible scenarios include Pakistan supporting anti-Taliban factions to pressure Kabul, the Taliban tolerating or enabling groups hostile to Islamabad, particularly TTP, and other regional actors quietly backing factions to advance their own security interests. If either side moves further toward supporting insurgent actors against the other, the region, particularly Afghanistan could face a renewed cycle of proxy conflict.

c) Regional powers: concern and strategic calculation

China, Iran, and Russia view the Taliban–Pakistan escalation with growing concern. Their interests go beyond border stability. They fear the ideological and physical spread of militant groups into Xinjiang, Baluchistan, Central Asia, or eastern Iran. They want to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a platform for transnational jihadist movements. They are wary of renewed U.S. involvement—directly or through counterterrorism partnerships. These concerns have pushed regional powers to quietly encourage de-escalation. Iran and Russia, in particular, have signaled openness to mediation—not out of sympathy for either side, but due to the risks that militant spillover poses to their own internal security.

d) The danger of a prolonged low-intensity conflict

Despite multiple ceasefires and negotiation rounds, the absence of an agreed border mechanism or crisis-management framework means the risk of renewed clashes remains high. The presence of armed groups across the frontier means even a small incident—e.g., a border misunderstanding—could reignite fighting. If this dynamic continues, the border could become a long-term low-intensity conflict zone. Insurgent and militant actors could gain unprecedented freedom of movement. Both actors could be drawn into a prolonged and unpredictable confrontation. In short, the Taliban–Pakistan crisis is no longer just a bilateral dispute; it is a regional security challenge with implications for South Asia, Central Asia, and the broader international community.

Policy implications

The crisis demonstrates how quickly a patron–proxy relationship can unravel into mistrust, blowback, and a sudden threat to Pakistan’s own security—something Islamabad had not anticipated. The following steps may help prevent further deterioration.

a) Recommendations for the Taliban

Build domestic legitimacy through inclusive, representative governance: military retaliation alone cannot compensate for the Taliban’s lack of broad-based legitimacy. Without inclusive political inclusion, the group will struggle to maintain long-term public support in future crises. Strong domestic legitimacy built on engagement with Afghan communities—women, youth, ethnic minorities, civil society, and political groups—is the key to durable stability. The lack of recognition was one of the key reasons why no states condemned Pakistan’s aggression of Afghan sovereignty.

Strengthen border security and prevent militant spillover: regardless of whether Pakistan's allegations are founded or unfounded, it is in Afghanistan's national interest to prevent any armed group from using Afghan territory to threaten a neighbor. A transparent border security mechanism will undercut Pakistan's justification for strikes and reduce chances of escalation.

Exercise restraint in media and narrative warfare: narrative mobilization may produce short-term political benefits, but it also deepens public polarization and normalizes conflict psychology. The Taliban should adopt communication strategies that de-escalate rather than inflame, prioritize factual information, avoid portraying conflict as inevitable or desirable.

b) Recommendations for Pakistan

End cross-border airstrikes and military operations: Pakistan's airstrikes have consistently resulted in civilian casualties, strengthened anti-Pakistan sentiment, and undermined Pakistan's own security. Military operations in Afghanistan have not weakened TTP; they have only hardened Afghan public opinion. Ending unilateral strikes is essential to prevent escalation.

Recalibrate the relationship with the Taliban: coercive pressure and public threats have proven counterproductive. Pakistan should engage the Taliban in good faith, but through diplomatic and humanitarian channels strictly for alleviating civilian suffering, not as a pathway to political recognition. It should avoid rhetoric that humiliates or delegitimizes Afghanistan as a state and pursue a stable, sovereign, and predictable relationship. Whether to reconcile with, oppose, or overthrow the Taliban is a domestic Afghan matter and should not be instrumentalized as a form of revenge.

Address internal militancy rather than externalizing the problem: decades of relying on militant groups for strategic depth have backfired. Pakistan must reform internal counterterrorism strategies, strengthen law-and-order mechanisms, and avoid shifting responsibility onto Afghanistan for Pakistan's internal insurgency trends.

Avoid supporting anti-Taliban factions: engaging Afghan political dissidents or exiled groups may offer short-term leverage, but it risks reopening proxy dynamics that historically destabilized the region, particularly Afghanistan. Pakistan should avoid returning to proxy warfare and prioritize diplomacy over fragmentation. Only with serious, good intentions can Pakistan play a constructive role in encouraging both Taliban and the wider Afghan society to work toward a shared future.

c) Recommendations for regional and international actors

Support structured de-escalation mechanisms: countries such as Qatar, Turkey, Iran, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and China played a constructive role during the crisis. Their involvement should be expanded into direct crisis-management channels, and confidence-building measures along the Durand Line.

Increase political pressure on both sides to avoid escalation: the international community should consistently urge no cross-border strikes, no rhetoric that incites hostility and no support to proxy groups or insurgent factions. Consistency matters: selective outrage weakens norms and emboldens violations.

Strengthen monitoring, reporting, and accountability: the UN and regional organizations should enhance monitoring of civilian harm, reporting on cross-border incidents, and support for independent verification mechanisms. This transparency will help deter violations and protect civilians.

Encourage political inclusion within Afghanistan: international actors should continue pressing for an inclusive Afghan political framework. This is not only a matter of human rights—it is a strategic necessity. A government isolated from its own people is more vulnerable to external interference, internal insurgency, and crises like the current one.

Prevent Afghanistan from becoming a new arena for great-power competition: regional powers must avoid fueling tensions or supporting factions. The current crisis is a security issue, not a geopolitical

opportunity. A fragmented Afghanistan or a prolonged Taliban–Pakistan confrontation would threaten South Asia, Central Asia, and the entire region.

Conclusion

The escalation between Taliban and Pakistan marks one of the most serious breakdowns in bilateral relations in decades. What began as cross-border accusations over militancy evolved into airstrikes, drone attacks, heavy ground clashes, and widespread civilian casualties. The crisis exposed the limits and volatility of the long-standing patron–proxy relationship, and the persistent mistrust and fragility that define shared security. The Taliban’s forceful response to Pakistan’s strikes reshaped domestic perceptions inside Afghanistan. For many Afghans, defending the country against an external threat eclipsed frustration with the Taliban’s internal governance. Pakistan, meanwhile, miscalculated the political impact of its actions. Instead of pressuring the Taliban, its strikes strengthened Afghan nationalist sentiment, degraded Islamabad’s influence over Taliban, and created new risks along a border already challenged by militant groups.

Regional and international reactions were muted, shaped by geopolitical alignments and the diplomatic costs of engaging an unrecognized Afghan government. While Qatar, Turkey, and a few Gulf states played constructive roles in facilitating ceasefire talks, these efforts were repeatedly undermined by renewed violence and a lack of formal mechanisms to manage crises. As a result, the region remains vulnerable to miscalculation, militant exploitation, and further escalation. The Taliban–Pakistan crisis is ultimately a test of how former-allies-now-foes navigate a landscape defined by shifting alliances, competing narratives, and the absence of structured border governance. Stability will depend on each side’s willingness to move beyond coercion and rhetoric, protect civilians, and address internal drivers of insecurity rather than externalizing them. Without sustained diplomacy and regional coordination, the Durand Line will remain not only a contested border but a trigger for future conflict—one with consequences far beyond the frontier itself.

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