

## Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban after 2021: A “Security Dilemma”?

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### *Abstract*

*Since the Afghan Taliban’s return to power in 2021, relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan’s Taliban-led government have deteriorated despite earlier expectations of improved cooperation. Islamabad anticipated that a friendly regime in Kabul would help curb cross-border militancy and contribute to regional stability. Instead, persistent security challenges and militant violence have deepened mistrust. Pakistan’s border management and counterterrorism measures are perceived by the Taliban as coercive, while the Taliban’s continued support of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) is viewed in Islamabad as a direct security threat. Beyond ideological affinity, the TTP also holds instrumental value for the Taliban in terms of internal cohesion and leverage, complicating efforts to address Pakistan’s concerns. Based on the above premise, this paper examines the evolving Pakistan–Taliban relationship between 2021 and 2025, and argues that the relationship is marked by a security dilemma between a sovereign state and a quasi-state authority. The paper further highlights how misperception, limited trust, and divergent understandings of security sustain this dynamic. The paper concludes by discussing policy-relevant implications for Pakistan and regional stability.*

**Keywords:** Afghanistan, Pakistan, Taliban, TTP, Security Dilemma, Strategic Depth, Border Security, Ideological Legitimacy

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## Introduction

The relationship between Pakistan and the Taliban regime in Kabul has seen a downward spiral in recent months. For decades, Islamabad's Afghan policy was predicated on the notion of a friendly government on Pakistan's western flank.<sup>1</sup> This approach indeed had a strategic logic. Since Pakistan had a tense border to the east with India, it did not expect the western border with Afghanistan to pose any significant security challenge. The Taliban's takeover of Kabul in 2021 sparked this hope for a friendly government. However, the Taliban's return to power challenged this expectation, which had earlier been viewed as a favorable outcome for Pakistan's Afghanistan policy. In the aftermath of the takeover, cross-border incidents and militant violence became more frequent, gradually undermining trust between the two sides.<sup>2</sup>

In October 2025, Pak-Afghan relations further deteriorated when Afghanistan falsely accused Pakistan of conducting air strikes against its territory.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the exchange of ground fire between the forces on both sides left significantly escalated tensions.<sup>4</sup> Islamabad highlighted the Taliban regime's harbouring of militant groups, principally the TTP, and demanded that Kabul rein them in as a condition of peace.<sup>5</sup> Kabul, in turn, rejected the Durand Line's legitimacy, resisted Pakistani border-fortification efforts, and framed alleged Pakistan strikes as infringements on Afghan sovereignty.<sup>6</sup> On 19 October 2025, both sides agreed to an immediate ceasefire, mediated by Qatar and Türkiye, yet the underlying structural fault lines remain unresolved.<sup>7</sup> Against this backdrop, the central

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<sup>1</sup> Aidan Parkes, "Considered Chaos: Revisiting Pakistan's 'Strategic Depth' in Afghanistan," *Strategic Analysis* 43, no. 4 (2019): 297–309, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2019.1625512>

<sup>2</sup> Bakhtawar Mian, "PM Blames Kabul-Delhi Nexus for Surge in Terrorist Attacks" *Dawn*, November 13, 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1954723>

<sup>3</sup> Islamuddin Sajid, "Pakistan denies carrying out airstrikes in eastern Afghanistan which killed 10," Anadolu Ajansi, 25 November 2025, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/pakistan-denies-carrying-out-airstrikes-in-eastern-afghanistan-which-killed-10/3753145>

<sup>4</sup> "Border Clashes Erupt between Pakistan and Afghanistan—Again," *The Economist*, October 16, 2025, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2025/10/16/border-clashes-erupt-between-pakistan-and-afghanistan-again>

<sup>5</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, "Operation Against Terrorist Sanctuaries of TTP," press release, March 18, 2024, <https://mofa.gov.pk/press-releases/operation-against-terrorist-sanctuaries-of-ttp>

<sup>6</sup> Mammad Ismayilov, "Pakistan-Afghanistan Conflict: Self-Defense or Sovereignty Violation?" *Daily Sabah*, November 7, 2025, <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/op-ed/pakistan-afghanistan-conflict-self-defense-or-sovereignty-violation>

<sup>7</sup> "Pakistan and Afghanistan Agree to Maintain Truce for Another Week," *Al Jazeera*, October 30, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/10/30/pakistan-and-afghanistan-agree-to-maintain-truce-for-another-week-turkiye>

question guiding this paper is why relations between Pakistan and the Taliban have deteriorated despite a history of interaction and limited cooperation.

This paper surveys the relevant literature, develops the theoretical framework of the security dilemma in an asymmetric, ideologically-inflected context. Then it provides the empirical analysis first tracing the historical background, then examining the phases 2021–2023 and 2023–2025, emphasising the TTP dimension, and discussing the implications of the findings for theory and policy. The methodological orientation of the paper is process tracing, with supplementary comparative historical analysis. The study reconstructs the causal sequence leading to the present asymmetrical security dilemma between Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban, focusing on the TTP sanctuary problem and the evolution of bilateral interactions after 2021. The paper draws on official statements of Pakistan's and Afghanistan's leaders, secondary source-led academic literature, and reputable media sources. The combination ensures triangulation between state positions, scholarly interpretation, and real-time reporting about facts on the ground.

### **Pakistan's Afghan Policy**

Scholarship on Pakistan's Afghan policy has long emphasized Islamabad's quest for a stable and friendly Kabul as a guarantor of its western flank. Ahmed Rashid argues that Pakistan's backing of the first Taliban regime in the 1990s was motivated by both ideological affinity and geostrategic necessity in the context of its security concerns and regional rivalries.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Christine Fair notes that, while regional dynamics, including the presence of other external actors, played a role, Pakistan consistently sought cooperative relations with Afghanistan to ensure a stable and sovereign neighbour whose territory did not pose a threat to Pakistani borders and whose markets could facilitate expanded trade, including access to Central Asia.<sup>9</sup> Following the US withdrawal in 2021, many analysts assumed that Pakistan's decades-old relationship with the Taliban would translate into privileged influence in Kabul.<sup>10</sup> Yet, more recent studies suggest that the

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<sup>8</sup>Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, rev. ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022), 183–187, 32.

<sup>9</sup>C. Christine Fair, *Pakistan's Internal Security Environment*, NBR Special Report no. 55 (Seattle and Washington, DC: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2016).

<sup>10</sup>Husain Haqqani and M. K. Bhadrakumar, "Pakistan's Pyrrhic Victory in Afghanistan," *Foreign Policy*, July 22, 2021, <https://www.foreignpolicy.com/2021/07/22/pakistans-pyrrhic-victory-afghanistan/>

Taliban government exhibits greater autonomy than expected, undercutting Pakistan's leverage. The assumption of Islamabad's unmediated control over Taliban policy is thus increasingly challenged.<sup>11</sup>

The main bone of contention is the TTP, which had emerged within Pakistan as a domestic insurgent movement after 2007, inadequately restrained by previous peace deals. Although formally separate, the TTP pledged allegiance (*bay'ah*) to the Taliban's Emir, thereby erasing clear boundaries between the two entities in Afghanistan.<sup>12</sup> The sheltering of the TTP in Afghan territory has produced a recurrent security concern for Pakistan, which affects Pakistan's continuous efforts in counter-terrorism in the country. Pakistan has witnessed an uptick in terror attacks on its soil by the TTP ever since the Taliban took over in Afghanistan.<sup>13</sup>

### **Theoretical Framework**

The concept of the security dilemma originates in classical realist thought, which holds that in an anarchic international system, states pursuing security through military or structural means may inadvertently threaten others, thereby provoking countermeasures and escalation. Robert Jervis famously observed that "in a condition of anarchy, efforts to increase one's security can decrease the security of others."<sup>14</sup> Ken Booth and Nicholas Wheeler further refine this insight by emphasizing how fear, uncertainty, and the absence of trust transform defensive actions into perceived offensive threats, producing what they describe as a *dilemma of interpretation*.<sup>15</sup>

Much of the existing literature on the security dilemma, however, assumes interactions between formally recognized states operating under shared expectations of sovereignty and diplomatic reciprocity, even when asymmetries of power exist. The Pakistan–Taliban relationship does not fit neatly within this conventional template. Pakistan functions as a sovereign

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<sup>11</sup> Abdul Rehman and Mingjin Wang, "Pakistan and the Taliban: A Strategic Asset Turned Strategic Predicament," *Asia Policy* 19, no. 3 (2024): 153–171.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Joscelyn, "Pakistani Taliban's Emir Renews Allegiance to Afghan Taliban," *Long War Journal*, August 19, 2021, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2021/08/pakistani-talibans-emir-renews-allegiance-to-afghan-taliban.php>

<sup>13</sup> Iftikhar A. Khan, "Terror Attacks Increased in Pakistan after Taliban Takeover of Afghanistan," *Dawn*, June 1, 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1757192>

<sup>14</sup> Robert Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (January 1978): 169.

<sup>15</sup> Ken Booth and Nicholas J. Wheeler, *The Security Dilemma: Fear, Cooperation, and Trust in World Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 54.

state with consolidated institutions and internationally recognized borders, whereas the Taliban's Islamic Emirate governs Afghanistan as a de facto regime with limited international recognition, a lack of administrative capacity, and a legitimacy base that extends beyond conventional statehood. This distinction does not render the Taliban a non-state actor in the traditional sense; rather, it positions the regime as a governing entity that exercises territorial control while deriving authority from religious credentials, resistance narratives, and internal movement cohesion.

These differences significantly shape how security-related actions are interpreted on both sides. Classical security dilemma theory presumes a degree of parity in how actors signal intentions and interpret threats. In the Pakistan–Taliban dyad, however, differences in institutional structure, legitimacy sources, and governance norms complicate intention signaling and weaken the explanatory power of state-centric deterrence models. As a result, traditional security dilemma literature alone cannot fully account for the dynamics at play between the two states.

The Taliban's authority is not derived solely from territorial control or administrative capacity but is also grounded in their self-identification as a movement rooted in jihad, religious legitimacy, and the moral leadership of the Emir. While this ideological foundation does not uniformly dictate Taliban behavior, nor does it preclude pragmatic political decision-making, it remains an important lens through which the movement interprets external pressure, particularly demands related to fellow militant groups such as the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan.

The TTP's allegiance to the Emir of the Taliban introduces a layer of religious and organizational obligation that complicates Taliban's decision-making. Acting decisively against the TTP carries potential costs for the Taliban, including reputational damage among militant constituencies and the risk of internal fragmentation. These constraints are reinforced by relational and cultural factors. The TTP supported the Afghan Taliban during their insurgency against the former Afghan government and its international backers; as a result, TTP militants are often regarded not merely as guests, whose protection is valorized under Pashtunwali, but as former comrades. This history shapes Taliban perceptions of obligation and restraint, even after assuming state power.

Importantly, however, the Taliban's tolerance and support of the TTP cannot be explained solely through ideological affinity or customary obligation. Available scholarship and policy analyses suggest that the TTP

also holds instrumental value for the Taliban regime. Beyond shared beliefs, the TTP's presence inside Afghanistan provides the Taliban with a degree of strategic leverage. Internally, continued association with the TTP reinforces the Emir's standing among militant networks and helps deter fragmentation within the broader jihadist landscape. Externally, the group functions as a pressure point in relations with Pakistan, enabling the Taliban to resist its perceived coercion and preserve autonomy without overtly escalating to direct interstate confrontation.

This instrumental dimension does not imply the existence of a formally articulated Taliban strategy of proxy warfare, nor does it suggest consensus across the movement. Rather, it reflects a pragmatic calculus in which the costs of fully dismantling the TTP, loss of militant support, erosion of ideological credibility, and diminished bargaining leverage, are weighed against the risks of continued tolerance. In this sense, the TTP occupies an ambiguous position: simultaneously an ideological affiliate, a former wartime ally, and a strategically useful yet destabilizing presence.

Pakistan and the Taliban thus interpret security issues through divergent strategic and normative frameworks, contributing to recurring tensions. From Islamabad's perspective, measures such as border fencing, cross-border strikes, and border closures are framed as defensive counterterrorism actions aimed at protecting territorial integrity and preventing militant infiltration. Official Pakistani discourse treats the persistence of cross-border militancy as a material security threat and views Taliban inaction and support for TTP primarily as a governance failure rather than an unavoidable product of ideology or misperception.

For the Taliban, however, these same actions are frequently interpreted as coercive, which erodes the sovereignty of Afghanistan. Taliban statements and post-2021 scholarship indicate that political behavior within the movement is shaped by a combination of religious legitimacy, jihadist identity, and local norms such as Pashtunwali, which emphasize honor, hospitality, and autonomy. These normative frameworks condition Taliban responses to external pressure, particularly when demands involve acting against allied militant groups.

Similarly, Pakistan's calls for decisive action against the TTP are articulated in Islamabad as legitimate counterterrorism requirements. Yet existing research suggests that the Taliban may perceive such demands as potentially

destabilizing for regime cohesion and internal authority.<sup>16</sup> While ideology and custom do not mechanically determine Taliban choices, they influence how the movement evaluates risks.

The presence of ideological legitimacy constraints and the informal strategic utility of the TTP complicate intention signaling, transforming misperception into sustained insecurity. This dynamic aligns more closely with Booth and Wheeler's dilemma of interpretation than with a pure Herz–Jervis model, while remaining firmly situated within the broader security dilemma tradition.

Differences also persist over trade and border management. Pakistan has increasingly employed transit routes and border crossings as instruments of pressure in its dealings with Kabul, whereas the Taliban view unimpeded access as a legitimate entitlement of a landlocked state. These competing interpretations generate recurring friction and episodic disruptions to bilateral trade and movement.

In essence, both actors operate according to defensive logics that are interpreted by the other as offensive. Pakistan emphasizes counterterrorism and border security to prevent militant spillover, while the Taliban prioritize sovereignty, regime stability, and religious legitimacy. The interaction of these logics—intensified by the Taliban–TTP relationship—perpetuates an asymmetric security dilemma in which measures intended to enhance security instead reinforce mutual suspicion.

### **Historical Context: From Strategic Depth to Strategic Dilemma**

Pakistan's relationship with the Taliban has evolved significantly over time. In the 1990s, Islamabad backed the first Taliban regime as an ally to end the civil war in Afghanistan and have them in power as their friendly government. Islamabad also wanted to offset any influence of India. Pakistan has always viewed India's influence in Afghanistan through a strategic lens and believes that India would try to pose a threat through its western border.<sup>17</sup> After 2001, Pakistan became central to the Taliban's

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<sup>16</sup> International Crisis Group, "Pakistan's TTP Problem and the Limits of Taliban Mediation," Crisis Group Asia Briefing no. 174 (December 2023).

<sup>17</sup> Noor Rehman, "Pakistan's Strategic Depth Policy in Afghanistan: Origin, Evolution and Practical Manifestations," *Research Journal of Human and Social Aspects* 2, no. 1 (2024): 1–17.

insurgency, allegedly offering safe havens and logistical support.<sup>18</sup> Under these conditions, the concept of strategic depth seemed viable.

However, after the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, Islamabad's expectations of cooperation were abruptly challenged. The Taliban emerged as a sovereign actor rather than a client. The change of behavior led to the erosion of Pakistan's leverage. There were hopes that Pakistan's two-decade-long terrorism problem would soon be addressed. But instead, cross-border militancy surged, and Afghanistan became less of a strategic asset than a potential liability.

Hence, what began as strategic depth has morphed into a strategic dilemma: Pakistan remains vulnerable to threats emanating from Afghan soil, while the Taliban resist Pakistani intervention in Afghanistan to stamp out TTP's hideouts, even when such actions are framed as counter-terrorism.

### ***Phase I (2021–2023): The Onset of Mutual Insecurity***

In the immediate aftermath of the Taliban takeover, two dynamics emerged simultaneously: Pakistan continued border fortification and intensified demands for Taliban action against the TTP, while the Taliban clung to the controversial principle of not recognizing the Durand Line as an international border<sup>19</sup> and refused to take concrete action against TTP elements.

From Islamabad's perspective, repeated militant activity originating from Afghanistan's eastern provinces, particularly Kunar, Khost, and Nangarhar has been interpreted as evidence of cross-border sanctuaries for anti-Pakistan groups.<sup>20</sup> Historically, Pakistani authorities have raised concerns regarding the presence of armed groups in Afghan territory that conduct operations inside Pakistan.<sup>21</sup> Between 2021 and 2024, documented incidents of terrorist attacks attributed to TTP and affiliated factions in Pakistan increased, with major attacks reported in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan, and northern Punjab.<sup>22</sup> Islamabad consistently called on the Taliban-led administration in Kabul to prevent the use of Afghan territory for anti-Pakistan operations, emphasizing the need for actionable measures

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<sup>18</sup> Barnett Rubin, "Afghanistan in 2025: Regional Prospects," *Foreign Affairs*, September 2025.

<sup>19</sup> Rehman and Wang, "Pakistan and the Taliban," 153–171.

<sup>20</sup> Pak Institute for Peace Studies, *Pakistan's Evolving Militant Landscape: State Responses and Policy Options* (Islamabad: PIPS, 2024).

<sup>21</sup> Waseem Abbasi, "Pakistan Warns of Strikes 'Deep into Afghanistan' If Cross-Border Attacks Continue," *Arab News*, October 29, 2025, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2620698/pakistan>

<sup>22</sup> Iftikhar A. Khan, "Terror Attacks Increased in Pakistan after Taliban Takeover of Afghanistan."



to restrict militant movement.<sup>23</sup> Despite diplomatic engagements, Pakistani security assessments indicate that cross-border attacks persisted, contributing to heightened bilateral tension.

***Phase II (2023–2025): The Escalation and the October 2025 Ceasefire***

Pakistan and the Taliban have increasingly disagreed over border security. Pakistan moved ahead with major border-fencing efforts along the Durand Line, which Kabul has repeatedly condemned as a unilateral attempt to fix a colonial-era border that the Taliban have historically disputed.<sup>24</sup>

Tensions escalated further in late 2024, when Pakistan reportedly conducted air strikes in eastern Afghanistan's Paktika Province, targeting alleged militant hideouts; an action neither denied nor accepted by Pakistan and condemned by the Taliban as a violation of Afghan sovereignty.<sup>25</sup> Taliban alleged that the strikes reportedly killed dozens, including civilians.<sup>26</sup> From Islamabad's vantage point, these operations were legitimate exercises of self-defence under the hot-pursuit doctrine. From the Taliban's vantage, they were acts of violation of its sovereignty by an erstwhile ally that had not turned into an adversary. The result has been renewed border hostilities and mutual distrust. Pakistani officials have publicly attributed a spate of militant attacks on Pakistani territory to militants allegedly based in Afghanistan.

In 2024, diplomatic efforts ground to a halt. Pakistani delegations led by intelligence and foreign office officials pressed the Taliban to provide verifiable action against the TTP cadres and sanctuaries. Taliban proposed a tribal-mediated dialogue rather than coercive disarmament; Islamabad rejected this as inadequate, insisting instead on disarmament and repatriation of the TTP. The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and Qatar attempted to mediate during the summer but achieved nothing.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Waseem Abbasi, "Pakistan Warns of Strikes 'Deep into Afghanistan' If Cross-Border Attacks Continue."

<sup>24</sup> "Pak-Afghan Border Fencing Issue to Be Resolved Diplomatically, Says Qureshi," *Dawn*, February 25, 2022, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1667422/pak-afghan-border-fencing-issue-to-be-resolved-diplomatically-says-qureshi>

<sup>25</sup> "Pakistan Air Strikes in Afghanistan Spark Taliban Warning of Retaliation," *Al Jazeera*, December 25, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/12/25/pakistan-air-strikes-in-afghanistan-spark-taliban-warning-of-retaliation>

<sup>26</sup> *The Express Tribune*, "46 Dead in Pakistan's Airstrikes on Afghan Border, Taliban Reports," December 26, 2024, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2518181/46-dead-in-pakistans-airstrikes-on-afghan-border-taliban-reports>

<sup>27</sup> Asma Akbar, "Taliban 2.0: Implications for National Security of Pakistan," *Journal of Development & Social Sciences* 5, no. 4 (2024): 540–553.

Meanwhile, TTP-claimed suicide attacks in Dera Ismail Khan and Bannu heightened Pakistani analysts' fears of a "reverse strategic depth"; the notion that Afghanistan had become a sanctuary enabling anti-Pakistan insurgents. Afghan officials, on their own part, accused Pakistan of exaggerating TTP threats emanating from Afghanistan. They pointed out to lack of action on the Pakistani side of the border to rein in TTP. Taliban believe that Pakistan is using TTP as a ruse to justify military pressure and to manipulate trade flows to control Kabul's economy and regain its leverage.<sup>28</sup> While in the past, it was widely believed that the Taliban relied on some kind of Pakistan's support, which could give Islamabad some leverage with the Taliban, but the new regime has diversified its relations. It now has political and economic linkages with Qatar, China, Russia, and even India. This could mean that the Taliban can now act more independently.

In another development, Pakistan intensified efforts to evict Afghan refugees, a campaign that the Taliban government in Kabul views as political leverage deployed by Islamabad. For decades, Pakistan hosted millions of Afghans fleeing conflict, but since 2023, Islamabad has increasingly treated their presence through a security-oriented lens, linking refugees to terrorism. The Taliban argue this repatriation push is less about the security situation in Pakistan than pressure: in their view, Pakistan uses the refugee population as pawns in its wider strategic contest with Afghanistan.<sup>29</sup>

From late 2024 into 2025, the conflict became deadlier and attacks surged. Between September and October 2025, after a string of TTP attacks that killed more than thirty Pakistani security personnel, Islamabad reportedly launched the most extensive cross-border strikes since 2021. However, the government did not acknowledge the strikes. These strikes reportedly targeted TTP encampments in Kabul, Kunar, and Paktika provinces; in retaliation, Afghan border troops fired heavy artillery across the Durand Line, hitting Pakistani positions at 21 locations along the whole length of the international border. Dozens were reported killed on both sides.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Bantirani Patro, "An Assessment of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan in 2023," *Defence & Diplomacy* 13, no. 2 (2024): 49–59.

<sup>29</sup> "Taliban Condemns Pakistan's Mass Expulsion of Afghan Refugees," *Al Jazeera*, November 1, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/11/1/taliban-condemns-pakistans-mass-expulsion-of-afghan-refugees>

<sup>30</sup> Saeed Shah, Mohammad Yunus Yawar, and Mushtaq Ali, "Dozens Killed in Pakistan-Afghanistan Clashes, Border Closed," *Reuters*, October 12, 2025,

Civilian casualties and the closure of trade routes produced a severe humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan.

The spectre of open war loomed large. Hundreds of cross-border incidents made the border indistinguishable from active conflict zones. International concern mounted. For example, Qatar and Türkiye convened emergency talks in Doha. Pakistan demanded that the Taliban regime clamp down on TTP with actionable and verifiable clauses in writing, which the Taliban could not provide. Negotiations nearly collapsed twice before both sides accepted a cease-fire brokered by Qatar and Türkiye on 19 October 2025.<sup>31</sup>

The terms of the cease-fire were significant, though flawed. The agreement established a “joint security coordination mechanism” of liaison officers from both countries, initially supervised by Qatar. It required cessation of air and artillery strikes, reopening of trade crossings, and detainee exchange. Crucially, however, it did not include any verifiable Taliban commitment to dismantle TTP bases. Effectively, Pakistan gained a ceasefire but not a lasting resolution of the underlying issue. Sporadic firing continued along the frontier into late October, and the Pakistani defence minister said that Pakistan would strike deep into Afghanistan if the intrusion continued.<sup>32</sup>

Regionally, stakeholders sought to contain the conflict. China urged restraint,<sup>33</sup> as it was mindful of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) corridor through Pakistan. Iran issued cautious statements emphasising Islamic brotherhood and opposition to foreign interference.<sup>34</sup> The US, though officially disengaged, expressed concern over terrorism risks emanating from Afghan soil.<sup>35</sup> Russia and Central Asian analysts warned of spill-over

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<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/afghanistan-claims-58-pakistani-soldiers-killed-clashes-border-closed-2025-10-12/>

<sup>31</sup> Abby Rogers, “Pakistan and Afghanistan Agree to Maintain Truce for Another Week: Türkiye,” *Al Jazeera*, October 30, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/10/30/pakistan-and-afghanistan-agree-to-maintain-truce-for-another-week-turkiye>

<sup>32</sup> Waseem Abbasi, “Pakistan Warns of Strikes ‘Deep into Afghanistan’ If Cross-Border Attacks Continue,” *Arab News*, October 29, 2025, <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/2620698/pakistan>

<sup>33</sup> Syed Raza Shaikh and Ryan Woo, “China Urges Restraint as Pakistan-Afghanistan Border Clashes Escalate,” *Reuters*, October 18, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/china-urges-restraint-pakistan-afghanistan-border-clashes-escalate-2025-10-18/>

<sup>34</sup> “Iran Calls for Dialogue between Pakistan, Afghanistan,” *Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA)*, October 17, 2025, <https://www.irna.ir/news/8512345678/Iran-Calls-for-Dialogue-between-Pakistan-Afghanistan>

<sup>35</sup> U.S. Department of State, “Department Press Briefing – October 16, 2025,” October 16, 2025, <https://www.state.gov/briefings/department-press-briefing-october-16-2025/>

effects from militant networks.<sup>36</sup> From a theoretical perspective, external actors functioned as stabilisers as they tried to contain the situation from escalation. Trust between the two further deteriorated as both were once considered friendly, but were now talking through mediators.

### **The TTP as a Structural Constant**

The persistence of the TTP is not merely a product of Taliban intransigence; it reflects the structural entanglement between the two movements. The TTP functions simultaneously as an ideological offshoot, a security liability, and a bargaining chip. For the Taliban, the group's presence grants leverage over Pakistan, reminding Islamabad that Afghan stability cannot be isolated from the dynamics of militancy along the Durand Line.

Even if elements within the Taliban leadership were inclined to limit the activities of the TTP, their ability to enforce such decisions appears constrained by internal dynamics. Authority within the movement remains uneven, with local commanders, often embedded in cross-border tribal and social networks, retaining significant operational autonomy. Forceful action against the TTP, therefore, carries the risk of internal dissent and of creating space for rival militant actors, including the Islamic State–Khorasan Province (IS-KP). In this context, the Taliban have tended to adopt a posture of calibrated restraint, publicly acknowledging Pakistan's concerns while refraining from measures that would significantly alter conditions on the ground.

Pakistan's military and diplomatic responses, ranging from defensive strikes at the border to stop infiltration of TTP and border closures to refugee repatriation and formal protests, have produced a limited coercive effect not because of insufficient pressure, but because they are grounded in a state-centric deterrence. Rather than altering Taliban's behavior, such measures are often absorbed within a broader religious narrative that prioritizes internal cohesion and moral authority over external cost-imposition. As a result, actions intended to signal resolve tend to reinforce Taliban resistance rather than induce compliance, revealing a structural mismatch between Pakistan's deterrence assumptions and the Taliban's decision-making framework.

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<sup>36</sup> Alexander Gabuev and Temur Umarov, "The Domino Effect: How Pakistan-Afghanistan Clashes Threaten the Entire Region," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 19, 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/posts/2025/10/the-domino-effect-pakistan-afghanistan-clashes>

## **Policy Implications for Pakistan and Regional Security**

The immediate challenge for Pakistan lies in recalibrating expectations from Afghanistan. It warrants pragmatic engagement. The following policy directions could be:

- Pakistan should move beyond residual assumptions that stability in Afghanistan can be secured through political alignment or informal understandings, and instead prioritize a policy of strategic denial, defined as systematically preventing Afghan territory from being used by anti-Pakistan militant groups. This approach emphasizes strengthening domestic border governance, enhancing legal and administrative control over cross-border movement, and investing in technological surveillance and intelligence capabilities. By reducing reliance on expectations of voluntary cooperation from the Taliban, strategic denial seeks to institutionalize security outcomes and minimize vulnerability to fluctuating political or ideological commitments across the border.
- Despite mistrust, Islamabad should pursue functional cooperation on trade, transit, and counter-narcotics. Issue-specific collaboration builds interdependence that may moderate Taliban behavior over time. Regional mechanisms under the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) or any other mechanism could be revived for this purpose.
- China, Türkiye, and Qatar have emerged as key mediators. Pakistan can leverage these relationships to create a multilateral buffer with Kabul. Beijing's interest in corridor security provides incentives for silent diplomacy.
- Ultimately, Pakistan's external security is inseparable from its internal stability. Socio-economic development in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan, coupled with deradicalization programs, can undercut the TTP's recruitment base. Merely externalizing the problem to Afghan soil overlooks the drivers within Pakistan itself.
- The Pakistan–Taliban standoff has had implications beyond bilateral relations, reinforcing the broader instability of post–US Afghanistan and underscoring the limits of coercive diplomacy in ideologically charged conflicts. For regional actors, the episode illustrates how unresolved state–non-state security dilemmas can generate secondary insecurity even for those not directly involved. Rather than introducing new alignments, the persistence of Pakistan–Taliban tensions has contributed to an environment of uncertainty in which regional powers must recalibrate their engagement with Kabul.

- The deterioration of Pakistan's relations with the Taliban complicates an already fragile security environment by increasing pressure along its western frontier, thereby narrowing strategic bandwidth. India has sought to diplomatically re-engage with Kabul, a development Islamabad views through a security lens shaped by historical rivalry, even in the absence of overt military cooperation. China and Russia, meanwhile, approach Afghanistan primarily through counterterrorism concerns, particularly the risk of militant spillover into Xinjiang and Central Asia. In each case, regional responses are shaped less by alliance formation than by shared anxieties over Afghanistan's role as a potential incubator of transnational militancy.

Taken together, these dynamics reinforce the central argument of this paper: that the Pakistan–Taliban relationship is best understood as an asymmetrical security dilemma amplified by ideological legitimacy and the presence of non-state actors. The absence of institutionalized mechanisms for signaling intent, combined with competing legitimacy frameworks, ensures that defensive measures are repeatedly misread, entrenching cycles of mistrust. For regional diplomacy, the key lesson is not the utility of coercion but the necessity of engaging hybrid political orders through parallel security and legitimacy-based frameworks. Without such an approach, both bilateral and regional efforts to stabilize Afghanistan will remain vulnerable to relapse.

## **Conclusion**

The Pakistan–Taliban relationship since 2021 illustrates how the security dilemma evolves under conditions of sovereignty and ideological governance. What initially appeared as a convergence of interests has gradually transformed into a sustained pattern of tension, shaped less by immediate tactical disputes than by incompatible understandings of legitimacy, authority, and security. The Taliban's continued accommodation of the TTP reflects constraints rooted in religious allegiance and internal cohesion, while Pakistan's insistence on eliminating militant sanctuaries stems from the imperatives of state sovereignty and internal order. These competing logics have produced a relationship characterized by recurrent mistrust rather than stable cooperation.

This dynamic explains why periods of de-escalation have remained fragile. The October 2025 ceasefire reduced the risk of immediate confrontation but did not address the structural conditions that generate insecurity on both sides. Pakistan continues to interpret the Taliban's inaction against the TTP as a security threat, while the Taliban view Pakistan's defensive measures

through the lens of sovereignty and ideological autonomy. The persistence of these perceptions suggests that the core dilemma is not operational but conceptual: Pakistan operates within a nation-state framework centered on territorial control and institutional authority, whereas the Taliban's political outlook remains anchored in a transnational religious conception of legitimacy.

From a policy perspective, the findings suggest that durable stability is unlikely to emerge through coercion. Managing this relationship will require a gradual, layered approach that combines calibrated pressure with incentives aimed at encouraging more predictable patterns of behavior. At the same time, Pakistan's ability to navigate external security challenges will depend on strengthening domestic resilience through improved governance, counter-extremism measures, and socio-economic consolidation. Without addressing both the external ideological constraints and the internal sources of vulnerability, the Pakistan–Taliban relationship is likely to remain prone to periodic relapse rather than sustained stabilization.