

MP-IDSA *Issue Brief*

Afghanistan's Pakistan Problem

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S*ummary*

Pakistan has always tried to influence the internal situation in Afghanistan to suit its strategic objectives. Islamabad's security-centric approach has dented Afghanistan's political system and inhibited its political growth.

After several months of tensions, the Pakistan–Afghanistan standoff seems far from abating. In the latest round of hostilities at the end of June 2026, Pakistan conducted airstrikes on the Samkhani district of the south-eastern province of Paktia. Dozens were killed and hundreds injured in these airstrikes, along with considerable damage to infrastructure.¹ Afghan Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani visited the families of the deceased and paid condolences.² The recent strikes are part of Pakistan’s series of operations that started around the time of the Afghan Foreign Minister’s trip to New Delhi (October 2025). They peaked at the time of the US–Israel attack on Iran towards the end of February 2026 and have continued intermittently since then. Pak–Taliban contentions stem from the former’s discontent over the Taliban government’s reticence in containing the Pakistani Taliban, also known as the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

At the heart of the present Afghanistan–Pakistan hostilities has been the TTP, Pakistan’s biggest albatross on the internal security front. Post-9/11, the Taliban fighters took refuge in Pakistan’s then FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas) region. Later, as the US war effort began to stretch, especially after the opening of another war in Iraq in 2003, the Taliban started to return to Afghanistan to build resistance against the US–NATO forces. Those who remained in Pakistan formed the TTP. The residual Taliban pursued Pakistan to implement Sharia law in the country, and they did so by using violence against Pakistan’s security apparatus. Since the return of the Afghan Taliban, Pakistan has remained hopeful that they will stop providing material and moral support to the Pakistani Taliban, their sibling faction.

Given the US–Iran hostilities, the renewed Pakistan–Afghanistan tensions have remained overshadowed. As the rest of the world, particularly the West, looks the other way, New Delhi has issued consistent condemnations of Pakistan’s indiscriminate strikes against Afghanistan. The escalation of fighting has caused loss of lives and livelihoods, targeting women, children, and mostly hapless civilians. The worst collateral impact has been the forceful deportation of Afghan refugees, which Pakistan has used as a punitive measure to deter and punish the Taliban government in Kabul. Apart from airstrikes, Pakistan has unleashed a string of pressure tactics, including a trade and transit blockade, which has only worsened the situation concerning the forceful expulsion of Afghan refugees across the Durand Line and, at the same time, led to financial losses of up to US\$ 850 million.³

¹ [**“Pakistan Launches Deadliest Attack on Afghanistan in months”**](#), *France 24*, 29 June 2026.

² [**“Taliban Interior Minister Visits Families of Victims of Pakistani Strikes”**](#), *Afghanistan International*, 14 July 2026.

³ [**“Pakistan-Taliban Tensions Cost Trade Sector \\$850 Million”**](#), *Afghanistan International*, 3 June 2026.

In this backdrop, this brief attempts to place in perspective Pakistan’s role in Afghanistan, a neighbour which straddles 44 per cent of its land borders. Given the two have been referred to as ‘brothers’ in past by former Afghan President Hamid Karzai, what is it that Pakistan brings to Afghanistan’s table? The two countries that became neighbours in 1947 share much in common—religion, ethnicities, culture and language too. However, despite their commonalities, Pakistan–Afghanistan relations have been marked by trust deficits and a perennial sense of strategic rivalry.

From Friend to Foe

Not long ago, the Pakistani establishment seemed to be in cahoots with the Taliban and celebrated their return to power in August 2021. The ‘friends to foes’ shift has been a defining regional event which few could foresee, given Pakistan stood by the Taliban when no one did. It was one of the three nations that recognised the Taliban 1.0 rule during 1996–2001 before the US war (with Pakistan in a frontline status) dislodged it. Not only did Pakistan facilitate the US–Taliban negotiations before the Doha peace accord, leading to the US–NATO withdrawal, but it was also amongst those countries that fully backed the regime in its initial days of tumult. As the 20-year war ended, Pakistan said and did things that would bring legitimacy to the Taliban’s rule. It also urged the US to unfreeze its assets abroad, amongst other things.⁴

However, there was never a dispute that Pakistan bred the Taliban not out of charity or brotherliness but with some strategic aims in mind. Foremost, Pakistan anticipated that the Taliban would help in eradicating the Pakistani Taliban. Second, Pakistan was convinced that the Taliban would never break the ice with New Delhi, given unpleasant memories of Taliban 1.0, hence ensuring the Taliban would maintain what Islamabad calls ‘strategic depth’. Third, a protracted association cutting across decades made Pakistan optimistic that the Taliban, upon their return, would be extremely beneficial.

With time, the Taliban have been able to find their feet, having sustained themselves for almost five years now. This happened despite financial turmoil and the larger world community ostracising them. Countries such as Russia have come forward in support by recognising the Taliban government and also signing a military pact.⁵ China, on its part, has even tried to mediate peace between Pakistan and

⁴ Baqir Sajjad Syed, “[Pakistan Again Urges US to Unfreeze Afghan Assets](#)”, *Dawn*, 20 August 2022.

⁵ Waslat Hasrat-Nazimi, “[Taliban, Russia are Cozying Up to Each Other — Why?](#)”, *Deutsche Welle*, 3 June 2026.

Afghanistan.⁶ Therefore, it is the ability to survive that has made the Taliban both confident and assertive while dealing with Pakistan, including the recurring military offensive on the borders.

What Ails the Bilateral Equations?

Few salient realities that characterise the dilemma of Afghanistan and Pakistan can be described under the following heads. Some of these are part of the broad inherent problems that have long existed and are, therefore, not Taliban-centric. These are primarily bilateral in nature and have endured for decades, some as early as Pakistan’s creation.

A Colonial Curse

The Durand Line, named after a British civil servant, Mortimer Durand, forms the 2,640 km long border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The contentious border conceived and drawn by Durand today lies at the root of Afghanistan–Pakistan contestation. The line was implemented in 1893 in the aftermath of the British–Afghan war, dividing the spheres of influence between Afghanistan and British India. However, the agreed line remained structurally oblivious to ground realities and resulted in the virtual dissection of interspersed ethnicities, predominantly Pashtun lands, lying on both sides.

Pakistan has a larger Pashtun population than Afghanistan, but on a population-ratio basis, in Afghanistan, the Pashtun form a formidable majority within the country's multi-ethnic demographic character. That partly explains the persevering Pashtun cause in Afghanistan as compared to Pakistan, and the reason that no government, including the Taliban, has dithered from pursuing it. Afghanistan’s contentions on the Durand Line are age-old, and successive governments have refused to cede their claims on Pakistani territories with a Pashtun population.

Pursuits of a separate Pashtun land partly explain Afghanistan’s paranoia once Pakistan was created on the western flank of British India. Sir Olaf Caroe, the Governor-General of North West Frontier Province (NWFP) in 1946–47, noted: “Irredentist feeling in Afghanistan, dormant during the time of British dominion in India, has been fanned to flame, and not allayed, by the creation of the neighbouring Muslim State of Pakistan”.⁷ Until the British withdrawal, Afghanistan was in a

⁶ Asif Shahzad and Joe Cash, “[China's Mediation Eases Fighting between Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sources Say](#)”, *Reuters*, 12 March 2026.

⁷ Olaf Caroe, *The Wells of Power: The Oilfields of South-Western Asia: A Global and Regional Study*, Macmillan & Co. Ltd., London, 1951, p. 16.

position of control, given that it was of significant value to both Russia and Britain. The Wakhan Corridor, a panhandle-shaped swath of its territory, separated British India from imperial Russia. It served as a buffer via what is now the Gilgit region (under Pakistan’s illegal control since 1947). The corridor, as a buffer territory, remained under the Emir of Afghanistan. Foreseeing changes in the status quo, Afghanistan became paranoid and voted against Pakistan’s admission at the UN.⁸

A Volatile Periphery

The Afghanistan–Pakistan region has remained one of the most volatile in the world. Afghanistan itself has a long history of wars and invasions. For an already unstable Afghanistan, Pakistan begets an equally (if not more) perennially unstable neighbourhood. Post-1947, Afghanistan inherited a troubled periphery along its border with Pakistan, comprising the FATA region (merged with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2018 via constitutional amendment) and Balochistan, which continues to challenge its 1948 integration with Pakistan.

The erstwhile FATA region, among Pakistan’s ‘ungoverned anarchic zones’, was the nerve centre of the mujahideen resistance against Soviet forces in the 1980s and a hub of terrorism, where radicalism flourished through a network of madrasas funded by the CIA and Saudi Arabia.⁹ Post-9/11, the region gave safe shelter to the retreating Taliban. The 1,300 km-plus section of the Durand Line, dominated by Pashtuns, has been the chief source of instability for Afghanistan. Apart from the insurgency and Pakistan’s reprisals against Afghanistan, the Balochistan border has remained an important arena, forming a conduit within the notorious Golden Crescent, formed by Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan, as the hub of illicit drug trafficking, from where opium is grown and distributed around the world.¹⁰

A Conduit for External Intervention

Afghanistan, the ‘Graveyard of Empires’, has witnessed multiple invasions—by the British, the Russians, and later the United States. The British used the region that would later become Pakistan, such as the Bolan Pass and Khyber Pass, to ambush the Afghan forces during their protracted wars in the 18th and 19th centuries. Later during the Cold War, it was Pakistan that provided logistical support in the CIA’s covert operation to oust the Soviet Union from Afghanistan.

⁸ Bruce Riedel, [“Pakistan Seeks Control of its Afghanistan Endgame”](#), *Brookings*, 30 September 2011.

⁹ Ahmad Shah Katawazai, [“The Evolution of FATA Land into a Hub of Terrorism”](#), *The SAIS Review of International Affairs*, 15 December 2016.

¹⁰ Michael Watson, [“Guns, Drugs, and Thugs: Smuggling in the Golden Crescent”](#), *The International Affairs Review*, 15 February 2026.

Subsequently, Pakistan was a frontline state in the US’s War on Terror against Afghanistan. Therefore, across centuries and decades, Pakistan has remained a perennial route for powers intervening in Afghanistan. It has used its logistical advantage towards Afghanistan to earn material benefits and political favours from the US throughout the two phases of US interventions in Afghanistan. Not only this, but Pakistan has also used its geography with Afghanistan to blackmail Washington to extract leeway against India.

An Abiding Dependency

Underneath the goals that the War on Terror projected, Pakistan always veered towards securing its own strategic objectives *vis-à-vis* Afghanistan’s future. This probably continued through the two decades of US–Taliban war. Pakistan has continuously fished for opportunities in Afghanistan’s troubled waters—be it cultivating the anti-communist constituencies during the Cold War years, nurturing the Mujahideen front against the Soviet Union or the Taliban fighting the US during the War on Terror.

All these decades, Pakistan’s attitude towards Afghanistan has been to find opportunities in a crisis, and in doing so, Pakistan has, advertently or inadvertently, ended up engaging the opposition better than those who held power, or the government of the day, so to speak. Pakistan’s dealings with Afghanistan, as a result, have mostly lain in the grey areas with fewer straight dealings. While engaging these factions or resistant constituencies, Pakistan has more often behaved as their patron and provider, providing them with money or arms. That is also how, during Operation Cyclone, Islamabad served as the conduit for US funds used to bolster anti-Soviet resistance.

The rupture in the Taliban–Pakistan equations can be seen as such a cumulative manifestation of Pakistan’s patronising tendencies. Since the Taliban, once their protégés, have refused to budge, Pakistan is left increasingly incensed that the group that once survived on their support is now refusing to bend the knee. A nuisance quotient has dominated how Pakistan treats Afghanistan. Probably, that is why its relations with Afghanistan per se have been far from cordial for the most part, except for a few phases, including that of Taliban 1.0.

Merely a Strategic Chessboard

Pakistan’s conduct on Afghanistan is always biased at least due to two primary factors. The first is the prioritising of its internal security goals, given extended

swathes of unstable regions bordering Afghanistan. More significantly, Pakistan has always viewed Afghanistan as a pitch to settle scores against New Delhi. This is despite India not possessing a direct land border with Afghanistan due to Gilgit-Baltistan’s controversial accession to Pakistan in 1947. India remains one of the most conspicuous defining factors of Pakistan’s gambit or policy on Afghanistan.

New Delhi drives Pakistan’s desire for strategic depth. Since independence, and even before that, India has had an abiding relationship with Afghanistan and enjoys considerable goodwill in the country. Chary of this, Pakistan has viewed every crisis as an opportunity to checkmate India. Underpinned by such biases, Pakistan has consistently treated Afghanistan as a strategic pawn and not a country on par. Its desire to outbid India has never let Islamabad perceive Afghanistan through a neutral lens.

Perpetual Interferer, Perennial Disrupter

For nearly three decades of its existence, Pakistan has been directly involved in wars in Afghanistan under the US’s aegis. Both these wars, the Afghan–Soviet War and the War on Terror, were defining events in Afghanistan’s trajectory. They continue to shape its society, geopolitics and interstate relations. In the name of managing US objectives in Afghanistan while seeking its seemingly contrary agenda, Pakistan has imperilled the strategic situation of Afghanistan rather irreparably. Pakistan has always tried to influence the internal situation in Afghanistan to suit its strategic objectives. Even the Afghan refugees that it hosted for decades and is now expelling were kept for strategic needs, not on humanitarian grounds. That grim view of refugees was pivotal in convincing the US Congress to intervene in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union.¹¹

Islamabad has invested less in resurrecting Afghanistan than in damaging it. Taliban could not be holding Kabul if Pakistan had not supported it. Therefore, while countries like India generously helped Afghanistan’s reconstruction and development, Pakistan has merely been a purveyor of US aid, covert or overt. Pakistan’s highly self-centred, security-centric approach has dented Afghanistan’s political system and inhibited its political growth.

¹¹ [**“US Congressman Who Backed Afghan Fighters Against the Soviets Dies”**](#), *Voice of America*, 10 February 2010.

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