

# CSAG INFORMATION PAPER:

## Pakistan-Afghanistan Tensions in the Shadow of the Middle East Conflict

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*The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of a number of international officers within the Combined Strategic Analysis Group (CSAG) and do not necessarily reflect the views of United States Central Command, nor of the nations represented within the CSAG or any other governmental agency.*

### 1. **Subject: Pakistan-Afghanistan Tensions in the Shadow of the Middle East Conflict**

2. **Purpose:** CSAG’s analysis on factors, conditions, and consequences of the current escalation in the Pakistan-Afghanistan conflict.

### 3. **Introduction:**

In late 2025 to early 2026, cross-border clashes erupted after Pakistani strikes on targets linked to Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) inside Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup> Pakistan accused the Taliban government of harboring TTP and Islamic State Khorasan (ISIS-K) militants who were launching attacks into Pakistan. Kabul rejected these claims and objected to Pakistani fortifications and fencing along the Durand Line.<sup>2</sup>

After a major suicide car bombing on Feb 16, 2026, at a security checkpoint in Bajaur, in Pakistan’s Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, Islamabad blamed militants operating from Afghan territory and carried out airstrikes against TTP and ISIS-K “militant camps and hideouts” in Afghanistan’s Nangarhar, Paktika, and Khost provinces, framing them as retaliation for a series of recent attacks.<sup>3</sup>

The Taliban government announced a “retaliatory operation” along multiple stretches of the border (Nangarhar, Nuristan, Kunar, Khost, Paktia, Paktika). On February 27, 2026, Pakistan formally launched Operation “Ghazab lil-Haq”, expanding from border clashes to coordinated strikes on Taliban positions in border areas.<sup>4</sup>

### 4. **Key Points Covered in the Information Environment:**

#### a. **Current situation in Afghanistan**

- i. The recent Global Terrorism Index (GTI) 2026 indicates a drop in terrorism in Afghanistan, but this statistic is deceptive as it excludes the violence of the ruling Taliban, which has in fact increased regional instability. Afghanistan now serves as a safe haven for 6,000 to 6,500 TTP fighters, whose attacks on Pakistan have escalated into direct military conflict between the two countries.<sup>5</sup>
- ii. A February 2026 37th report of the UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team confirms the Taliban are actively fostering a "permissive environment" for terrorism, specifically providing TTP with advanced weaponry and support to launch more complex

attacks against Pakistan. Operating under Taliban "patronage," Al-Qaida enhances other terrorist groups like TTP, and while ISIS-K is pressured, it remains a potent external threat, solidifying Afghanistan's role as a central hub for various militant organizations.<sup>6</sup>

b. Pakistan's position and key statements:

- i. President Asif Ali Zardari defended the military actions, stating that Islamabad had exhausted all diplomatic channels before resorting to force to target militants operating from Afghan soil.<sup>7</sup> Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, asserted that Pakistan's armed forces "have the full capability to crush any aggressive ambitions". Defense Minister Khawaja Mohammad Asif unequivocally stated, "Our patience has now run out. Now it is open war between us," and accused the Taliban of turning Afghanistan "into a colony of India," Pakistan's archrival, and of "exporting terrorism".<sup>8</sup>
- ii. Pakistan accuses the Afghan Taliban of providing a safe haven for these militants. Islamabad has consistently maintained that its military actions, including airstrikes deep within Afghanistan, are aimed at neutralizing the TTP and its affiliates.

c. Afghanistan's stance:

- i. The Afghan Taliban government has portrayed its actions as retaliatory and a defense of its national sovereignty, while denying Pakistan's accusations about providing a safe haven for the TTP or any other militant group.<sup>9</sup> Afghan officials have accused Pakistan of violating their airspace and targeting civilians, including homes, mosques, and refugee camps in multiple provinces.<sup>10</sup>

d. Civilian casualties

- i. Reports indicate that there have been civilian casualties within Pakistan from cross-border artillery and mortar fire, missile and UAV attacks from Afghanistan.<sup>11</sup>
- ii. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) reported at least 76 civilian deaths and 213 injuries in Afghanistan from 26 February to 16 March.<sup>12</sup>

5. Consequences:

- a. An analysis of the UN report and GTI-2026 data indicates that Afghanistan has transitioned from a terror battleground to a state-sponsored incubator, where the Taliban actively equip a network of allied groups, making the decline in internal incidents a statistical illusion that masks a grave threat to global security.
- b. Geopolitical Aspects: The conflict has drawn reactions from major world powers, including the U.S., Russia, China, and India. Each nation's stance is shaped by its own strategic interests, regional alliances, and history of engagement.
  - i. The **U.S. State Department** has stated its support for "Pakistan's right to defend itself against attacks from the Taliban." Washington has also criticized the Taliban for failing to uphold counterterrorism commitments. The U.S. has a number of strategic concerns: regional stability, preventing the region from becoming a haven for terrorist groups, securing access to critical minerals, and competing with China's growing influence.<sup>13</sup>
  - ii. **China** is mediating peace talks between Pakistan and Afghanistan, which began around April 2, 2026, in Urumqi to de-escalate tensions. China is worried that the conflict will harm its investments and economic growth under the Belt and Road Initiative and particularly the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) infrastructure projects valued at over \$60 billion.<sup>14</sup> Instability creates a challenging geopolitical environment, potentially drawing China into regional competition, especially with India.

- iii. **India's** Foreign Ministry "strongly" condemned Pakistan's airstrikes, calling them an "attempt by Pakistan to externalize its internal failures".<sup>15</sup> The main issue is the rivalry between the two nuclear-armed neighbors. Since the Taliban returned to power, India has gradually re-engaged with Kabul.<sup>16</sup> Some analysts view this as a strategy to counter Pakistan's influence and secure India's own interests in the region.<sup>17</sup>
- iv. **Russian** Ministry of Foreign Affairs has urged the parties to halt cross-border attacks immediately and resolve their differences through diplomatic means, also offering to mediate.<sup>18</sup> Russia's primary interest is stability on its southern "near abroad", preventing the spillover of terrorism, and drug trafficking into Central Asia and its own territory.<sup>19</sup> By positioning itself as a mediator, Moscow seeks to demonstrate its relevance as a global power and an alternative partner to the West.<sup>20</sup>
- c. Economic Consequences: Major border crossings Afghanistan and Pakistan have closed. The resultant drop in trade has led to rising prices for essential goods, raised inflation more broadly, and increased economic burden for the local population of neighboring regions. According to Pakistan's Central Bank, Pakistan's exports to Afghanistan fell by 56% in early 2026. Pakistan's exports lose, on average, \$177m per month when the crossings are closed.<sup>21</sup>
- d. Humanitarian Consequences: The conflict led to migration as people fled conflict areas in search of safety, especially near the Durand Line, putting pressure on host territories and increasing social tensions. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the conflict between Afghanistan and Pakistan resulted in internal displacement within both countries, with an estimated 115,000 individuals displaced within Afghanistan and approximately 3,000 individuals within Pakistan.<sup>22</sup>

## 6. Potential CENTCOM Actions:

Given the higher priority challenges across the AOR, and absent a direct and pressing threat to national security, CENTCOM's responses to this conflict will have to remain limited. However, the limited U.S. involvement may create an opportunity for China and Russia to expand their influence in Central and South Asia impacting the U.S. role in these regions. In response, CENTCOM could implement the following cost-effective measures along several coordinated lines of efforts:

- a. Enhanced Intelligence: Identify and allocate various intelligence assets to gain insights into the Taliban regime's dynamics and the nature of its alliances with terrorist groups.
- b. Security Cooperation with Partners: Strengthening regional partners is essential to containing the threat.
  - i. Potentially offer Pakistani military advanced ISR platforms, border security technology, and expert consultation (*to exchange intelligence assessments on the situation in Afghanistan*).
  - ii. Increase engagements with Central Asian States, especially with Afghanistan's neighbors, on activities like joint training exercises focused on counterterrorism and border security. Also look to improve agreements that establish the framework for cooperation essential to contain the threat.
- c. Information and Cyber Operations:
  - i. Targeted information operations (IO) to expose the Taliban's collusion with terrorist groups, would sow discord between the Taliban, their foreign fighter allies, and the Afghan population suffering under their rule.

- ii. Employing cyber capabilities and VEO's websites, social media channels, and dark web presences could disrupt the terrorist online activities (*recruitment, communication, financing networks of ISIL-K, Al-Qaida, and TTP*).
- d. Contingency Planning: Develop and rehearse detailed contingency plans for a range of scenarios, including:
  - i. Sporadic rapid escalations of tension between Afghanistan and Pakistan.
  - ii. An attack planned from Afghanistan against U.S. interests abroad.
  - iii. A rapid, limited-duration mission to secure or destroy critical targets.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica*, "Afghanistan-Pakistan Conflict," Encyclopaedia Britannica, March 20, 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Afghanistan-Pakistan-Conflict-2025> (accessed March 30, 2026).

<sup>2</sup> "The Durand Line is a largely unmarked border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, stretching approximately 1,600 miles (2,640 km). It was established in 1893 under an agreement between British India and the Afghan Emir Abdur-Rahman Khan. It was named after the British diplomat Sir Henry Mortimer Durand, who oversaw the demarcation process. It runs through Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan, and the disputed region of Gilgit-Baltistan in northern and western Pakistan, separating them from the northeastern and southern provinces of Afghanistan. From a geopolitical and geostrategic perspective, it is considered one of the most dangerous borders in the world. The status of the line is disputed: Pakistan considers it an internationally recognized border inherited from the days of British India, while Afghanistan views it as unjust and imposed by colonial authorities, refusing to recognize its legitimacy." <https://www.britannica.com/event/Durand-Line>.

<sup>3</sup> Alexander Palmer and Alexander Margolis, "Why Did Pakistan Announce 'Open War' Against the Taliban?," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, February 27, 2026, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/why-did-pakistan-announce-open-war-against-taliban> (accessed March 5, 2026).

<sup>4</sup> Muhammad Murad, "How Former Allies Pakistan and the Taliban Came to 'Open War'," *The Diplomat*, March 3, 2026, <https://thediplomat.com/2026/03/how-former-allies-pakistan-and-the-taliban-came-to-open-war/> (accessed March 12, 2026).

<sup>5</sup> *Institute for Economics & Peace*, The Iran War and the Global Terrorism Threat: Global Terrorism Index 2026: Special Supplement (Sydney, March 2026), <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/The-Iran-War-and-The-Global-Terrorism-Threat.pdf> (accessed April 7, 2026).

<sup>6</sup> *United Nations Security Council*, "Fifteenth report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL (Da'esh) to international peace and security and the range of United Nations efforts in support of Member States in countering the threat, S/2026/44", January 31, 2026, <https://docs.un.org/en/S/2026/44> (accessed February 17, 2026).

<sup>7</sup> Riaz Khan and Rahim Faiez, "Pakistan and Afghanistan engage in new cross-border fighting," *Associated Press*, March 3, 2026, <https://apnews.com/article/pakistan-afghanistan-fighting-ground-attacks-military-posts-e057780413f84b222c2fe30b3cbcf172> (accessed March 26, 2026).

<sup>8</sup> Imtiaz Tyab, "Pakistan says it is in 'open war' with Afghanistan, launches strikes on Kabul," *CBS News*, February 28, 2026, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/pakistan-says-it-is-in-open-war-with-afghanistan-launches-strikes-on-kabul/> (accessed April 7, 2026).

<sup>9</sup> Riaz Khan and Rahim Faiez, "Pakistan and Afghanistan engage in new cross-border fighting," *Associated Press*, March 3, 2026, <https://apnews.com/article/pakistan-afghanistan-fighting-ground-attacks-military-posts-e057780413f84b222c2fe30b3cbcf172> (accessed March 26, 2026).

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- <sup>10</sup> Abdul Qahar Afghan and Riaz Khan, "Pakistan, Afghanistan engage in new cross-border fighting," *Boston Herald*, March 3, 2026, <https://www.bostonherald.com/2026/03/03/pakistan-afghanistan-clashes/> (accessed March 30, 2026).
- <sup>11</sup> "2026 Afghanistan–Pakistan conflict," *Wikipedia*, April 4, 2026, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2026\\_Afghanistan%E2%80%93Pakistan\\_conflict#cite\\_note-pakcasualties8-35](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2026_Afghanistan%E2%80%93Pakistan_conflict#cite_note-pakcasualties8-35) (accessed April 6, 2026).
- <sup>12</sup> *United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA)*, "UNAMA Statement on Airstrike on Medical Facility in Kabul," UNAMA, February 28, 2026, <https://unama.unmissions.org/en/press-releases/unama-statement-airstrike-medical-facility-kabul> (accessed March 27, 2026).
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