

DURAND LINE ON THE BRINK: PAKISTAN AND THE TTP CONFLICT



Tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan have escalated into what Pakistani officials describe as an “open war,” driven by Islamabad’s assertion that the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) is planning and launching attacks from Afghan territory. The Afghan Taliban authorities, formally operating as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, deny allowing Afghan soil to be used against Pakistan and counter-accuse Islamabad of supporting hostile actors, including elements linked to Islamic State Khorasan Province.

The crisis intensified following a surge of high-casualty TTP attacks against Pakistani military and police targets in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and former tribal districts. Islamabad argues that these operations are enabled by cross-border sanctuary, leadership presence, and logistical depth inside Afghanistan.

BACKGROUND: THE TEHREEK-E-TALIBAN (TTP)

The TTP, also known as the Pakistani Taliban, was formed in December 2007 in Pakistan’s former Federally Administered Tribal Areas along the Afghan border as an umbrella organization uniting around 40 militant factions under the leadership of Baitullah Mehsud. Its roots trace back to the aftermath of the 2001 U.S.-led intervention in Afghanistan, when Afghan Taliban and allied fighters moved into Pakistan’s tribal belt, where weak state control and local grievances facilitated the growth of militancy.

The TTP declared its objectives as enforcing its interpretation of Sharia law in Pakistan, supporting the Afghan Taliban insurgency, and waging jihad against the Pakistani state. Between 2007 and 2014, it carried out numerous high-profile

attacks, including the assassination of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto in December 2007, the 2009 assault on Pakistan Army General Headquarters in Rawalpindi, and the 2014 Army Public School massacre in Peshawar, in which more than 140 people, mostly children, were killed.

After Baitullah Mehsud was killed in a 2009 U.S. drone strike, leadership passed to Hakimullah Mehsud and later to Noor Wali Mehsud, the current leader. Intensive Pakistani military operations, internal factionalism, and competition from Islamic State– Khorasan Province (ISKP) weakened the group after 2014, pushing many fighters into eastern Afghanistan. However, following the return to power of the Taliban in Afghanistan in August 2021, the TTP experienced a resurgence, with ceasefire talks repeatedly collapsing and attacks increasing, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, making it one of Pakistan’s most significant internal security threats today.

rough shared beliefs, training exposure, and informal facilitation networks.

TTP POLITICAL GOALS AND STRATEGY

The TTP seeks to undermine Pakistan’s constitutional order by challenging the legitimacy of the state and attempting to replace it with its own rigid interpretation of governance rooted in militant ideology. A central objective is reversing the 2018 merger of the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, a reform designed to integrate the tribal districts into Pakistan’s legal and political framework, which the group views as a direct threat to its historical influence.

Simultaneously, the TTP aims to expand its ideological reach and operational control across key border regions, particularly along the Afghanistan–Pakistan frontier, leveraging cross-border mobility and local grievances to entrench its presence. Through sustained and targeted attacks on military personnel, police units, and state installations, the group seeks to erode public confidence in the government’s ability to provide security, gradually weakening state authority and creating space for its own parallel structures of control.

PAKISTAN’S RESPONSE

Pakistan began reacting militarily against the TTP in 2007, following the group’s formal emergence, and intensified large-scale counter-insurgency operations from 2009 onward. It has since responded through a combination of diplomatic pressure, domestic security crackdowns, cross-border artillery fire, and increasingly overt air operations inside Afghanistan. Earlier cross-border strikes targeted eastern Afghan provinces near the frontier. However, the most recent escalation in February 2026 marked a significant expansion in scope, with Pakistani strikes reaching major Afghan cities including Kabul and Kandahar. Kandahar holds particular symbolic importance as the historical power base of the Afghan Taliban leadership. These strikes represent a shift from limited counter-terrorism retaliation to broader coercive signaling directed at the Taliban regime itself. Afghanistan has responded with cross-border shelling, drone activity, and threats of retaliation against Pakistani military positions. The core dispute centers on sanctuary. Islamabad asserts that without dismantling TTP infrastructure inside Afghanistan, attacks on Pakistani soil will continue. Kabul denies institutional support for the TTP but faces internal ideological and political constraints in confronting allied militant networks.

ESCALATION OR PEACE: LIKELY PATHWAYS

The most likely scenario (approximately 50 percent likelihood) is a managed but sustained tit-for-tat conflict characterized by periodic Pakistani air and artillery strikes against alleged TTP targets inside Afghanistan, coupled with Afghan border retaliation and continued TTP attacks inside Pakistan; this would stop short of full conventional war but maintain chronic instability along the Durand Line. A second scenario (around 25 percent likelihood) involves deeper escalation into a prolonged border conflict, with expanded Pakistani strikes against Taliban military infrastructure in major cities and intensified Afghan retaliation, increasing displacement and regional instability. A negotiated de-escalation (approximately 20 percent likelihood) could emerge if Afghanistan’s stated willingness to talk leads to a structured arrangement involving relocation of TTP fighters away from the border and some form of verification mechanism acceptable to Pakistan. The least likely but still plausible scenario (about 5 percent likelihood) is rapid stabilization through comprehensive security cooperation, which would require unprecedented Taliban action against TTP leadership and infrastructure and significant political concessions from Islamabad.

TTP Activity in Pakistan



STRATEGIC ASSESSMENT

The conflict reflects a structural dilemma: Pakistan views TTP sanctuary as an existential security threat, while the Afghan Taliban face ideological, factional, and political risks in moving decisively against a historically aligned militant network. Without a credible enforcement mechanism tied to negotiations, continued cycles of attack and retaliation remain highly probable.

The trajectory now depends less on rhetoric and more on whether Kabul can demonstrate tangible constraints on TTP operational capacity, and whether Islamabad is willing to calibrate military pressure in exchange for verifiable steps toward de-escalation.



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