

MP-IDSA *Issue Brief*

India, Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban: Evolving Dynamics

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Summary

The growing divergences between Kabul and Islamabad have led to escalating border hostilities and repeated violations of territorial integrity and sovereignty between erstwhile allies. Meanwhile, India is pragmatically dealing with the regime in Afghanistan, combining caution with realpolitik diplomacy.

Introduction

The escalation of Pakistani airstrikes inside Afghanistan in Kabul, Khost, Jalalabad and Paktika, coupled with border clashes, at a time when Amir Khan Muttaqi visited India, indicates geopolitical recalibration in South Asia. The interim Afghan Foreign Minister’s visit to India in October 2025 came on the heels of hostilities and distrust between Kabul and Islamabad over the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) issue and Pakistani airstrikes in parts of Afghanistan.

The strategic depth Islamabad once hoped to exercise in Kabul following the Taliban’s resurgence in August 2021 now stands severely eroded. Islamabad may perceive New Delhi’s diplomatic engagement with Kabul as strategic encirclement. As past precedent suggests, this could push Pakistan to foment instability on both sides of its borders and trigger a new phase of regional contestation and hostility. Conversely, New Delhi appears to be pragmatically leveraging the interim Afghan regime’s outreach to preserve its soft-power influence in Afghanistan, secure security guarantees for future economic and infrastructure projects, and advance connectivity with Central Asia.

The India–Taliban Engagement

After nearly two decades of engaging with internationally recognised Afghan governments since 2001, New Delhi recalibrated its foreign policy once the Afghan Taliban regained control of Kabul over four years ago. The withdrawal of NATO-led forces in 2021, marking the end of America’s ‘forever wars’, prompted India to recalibrate its Afghan policy by initially closing its embassy. This move was a necessary pause in diplomatic engagement, given that the Haqqani network—the most powerful faction within the Taliban—had assumed key positions, including the Interior Ministry, and was linked to the 2008 attack on the Indian Embassy in Kabul and the 2014 attack on the consulate in Herat. Meanwhile, UN reports highlighted the re-emergence of terror networks such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) across Afghanistan after August 2021.

Nevertheless, considering India’s long-standing humanitarian and infrastructural presence in Afghanistan, it deployed a technical mission in June 2022 to ensure the delivery of aid—including medicines, wheat, clothing and vaccines—to preserve people-to-people ties and maintain a strategic footprint in the region. This was a pragmatic foreign policy step, aimed at upholding India’s civilisational and cultural relations with Afghans and facilitating communication with the interim rulers. It also provided a pathway to retain India’s strategic presence through humanitarian projects such as maintaining the Salma Dam (Afghan–India Friendship Dam). This balancing act reflected New Delhi’s effort to address the challenges of engagement

without recognition with a regime still under UN sanctions, while building on its soft-power diplomacy approach.

The technical mission and continued engagement with the Taliban paved the way for the meeting between External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar and Amir Khan Muttaqi in October 2025, followed by India’s announcement¹ to upgrade its diplomatic mission to a full-fledged embassy in Kabul. India’s steadfast commitment to health diplomacy was underscored by the announcement to construct an oncology and trauma centre in Kabul and five maternity clinics in Paktia and Khost, among other projects. In response, the Afghan minister pledged² to send Afghan diplomats to India, building on the consulate presence in Mumbai, while reiterating general assurances that no terror groups would be allowed to use Afghan soil to target other countries, particularly India.

While trade, healthcare, humanitarian aid, public infrastructure and connectivity projects featured prominently in the joint statement, closer attention must be paid to the references to countering regional and cross-border terrorism, upholding sovereignty and territorial integrity, and addressing humanitarian concerns over the coercive deportation of Afghan refugees. Notably, Amir Khan Muttaqi’s description of Pakistan as an ‘unhappy neighbour’³ during his press conference in New Delhi underscores Pakistan’s role as a primary perpetrator of regional terrorism and a violator of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of both India and Afghanistan. This becomes especially relevant as the Afghan Taliban seek to diversify partnerships and project a more inclusive diplomatic posture towards the international community—at a time when their decades-long partnership with Pakistan has been greatly undermined.

Pakistan’s policies of state-sponsored terrorism in South Asia have long aimed to undermine stability and communal harmony in India, as evident in the Pahalgam terror attacks of April 2025. These policies are also reflected in Pakistan’s repeated airstrikes, allegedly targeting civilians in Afghanistan under the pretext of attacking TTP leaders, to create unrest and penalise the Afghan Taliban for failing to curb TTP militancy. Once a client of the Pakistani state, the Afghan Taliban has now accused its erstwhile patron of ‘breaching the skies’.⁴

Amid ongoing narrative warfare and border hostilities between Pakistan and Afghanistan, and the post-Pahalgam and Operation Sindoor developments between

¹ Rezaul H Laskar, [“India Formally Upgrades Its ‘Technical Mission’ in Kabul to Embassy”](#), *Hindustan Times*, 22 October 2025.

² [“India-Afghanistan Joint Statement \(October 10, 2025\)”](#), Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 10 October 2025.

³ [“Except Pakistan All Other Neighbours Happy With Us, Says Afghan Minister”](#), *NDTV*, 14 October 2025.

⁴ Melissa Skorka, [“Al Qaeda Rises Amid Afghan-Pakistani Conflict”](#), *Wall Street Journal*, 15 October 2025.

India and Pakistan, convergences in regional perceptions are becoming increasingly visible through India–Afghan Taliban engagement. However, it is worth recalling that despite condemning the Pahalgam attack, the Afghan Taliban avoided using the term ‘terror’ and refrained from overt criticism of Pakistan⁵—likely an attempt to maintain a delicate regional balance despite deteriorating ties with Islamabad.

India, meanwhile, has sought to capitalise on this momentum to advance its economic and infrastructural goals and overcome obstacles to regional connectivity. Through closer engagement with the Afghan Taliban, India can resume and expand the India–Afghanistan Air Freight Corridor and the Chabahar Port project (contingent on cooperation with the US for a renewed 2018 waiver).⁶ Strengthening commercial trade with its extended neighbourhood must, however, be accompanied by security guarantees to neutralise anti-India activities originating in Afghanistan. During his recent visit to New Delhi, Muttaqi advocated for promoting trade and connectivity through the Chabahar Port, announced a trade committee to address challenges in the India–Afghanistan commercial partnership, and invited Afghan traders to participate in Indian trade fairs and exhibitions.

While optimism surrounding regional connectivity and mutual prosperity remains a recurring theme in Taliban rhetoric, concerns persist over whether ideologically hardened elements within the group might sabotage such prospects by colluding with ISIS–K, LeT or JeM. Simultaneously, questions arise about whether the Afghan Taliban—while seeking global legitimacy and rebuilding the country—can allocate sufficient resources to support trade and connectivity initiatives with India.

Although inclusivity, women’s education and minority rights remain significant concerns in Afghanistan, continued engagement with Taliban leaders is essential to India’s realpolitik approach for safeguarding national interests—particularly in preventing radicalisation or terrorism spillover from the western front. In modern diplomacy, foreign policy is pursued holistically, where economic, infrastructural and security objectives are interlinked. Therefore, while human rights remain essential, India’s pragmatic approach necessitates separating these issues from its broader engagement with the Afghan regime to secure national interests. Within India’s neighbourhood policy framework, developmental and security priorities can be advanced independently of contentious domestic Afghan issues. Converging interests should guide the renewed India–Afghanistan partnership alongside India’s soft-power diplomacy.

Nevertheless, several factors could slow down India–Taliban engagement moving forward. These include a lack of actionable guarantees ensuring the long-term

⁵ [“Statement by the Spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic”, X, 23 April 2025, 3:46 p.m.](#)

⁶ Arun Dhital, [“US Sanctions On India’s Chabahar Port Project in Iran Take Effect, Ending Waiver”](#), *Swarajya*, 30 September 2025.

security of India’s diplomatic staff, assets and investments in Afghanistan, as well as verifiable cooperation in neutralising anti-India and Islamic State-affiliated groups operating from Afghan soil. Additionally, India must periodically examine the scope of its engagement with a UN-sanctioned regime to secure its interests over defined intervals, based on actionable intelligence and evolving geopolitical trends. This is essential to ensure it effectively balances its foreign policy objectives without being perceived as endorsing an interim administration yet to gain international legitimacy.

Pakistan–Afghanistan: Military Escalation

On the one hand, while the historic visit of the Afghan interim foreign minister to India was making headlines, the South Asian geopolitical calculus was further recalibrated. This occurred as renewed border conflicts between Afghanistan and Pakistan erupted along the disputed Durand Line in the same month, following Pakistani airstrikes on 9 October 2025. Notably, the clashes briefly turned into a frozen conflict after a ceasefire was announced, but resumed following bombings in multiple locations across Afghanistan’s Paktika province, before another truce was agreed upon through mediation by Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Interestingly, Pakistan appears to perceive this ceasefire as holding only so long as the Afghan Taliban bring the TTP to heel—even if it means unilaterally violating Afghanistan’s territorial integrity.

Meanwhile, the Durand Line, which Pakistan claims as its official border with Afghanistan, remains one of the most contested borders in modern history. Every Afghan leadership, including the Afghan Taliban, has outrightly rejected it, pushing back against Pakistan’s attempts to erect permanent border fencing. One of the most corrosive factors behind the erosion of the decades-long Afghanistan–Pakistan relationship, apart from the disputed border, is the escalation of TTP attacks in Pakistan, mainly in the restive Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.

Between 2021 and 2025, the TTP, an ideological offshoot of the Afghan Taliban, carried out approximately 630⁷ attacks in Pakistan, seeking to replicate the Afghan Taliban’s success in ousting external actors and the former Afghan government. In the most recent Pakistani airstrikes accompanying the border clashes, the intended target, Noor Wali Mehsud, leader of the TTP, reportedly survived, as evidenced by a video released afterwards.

However, amid these border clashes, it is imperative to assess the posturing and narratives advanced by both sides during the ongoing recalibration of Afghan Taliban–Pakistan ties. The narratives and phrasing used to frame key events are

⁷ [“The Battle for the Borderlands: The Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan Challenges the State’s Control”](#), ACLED, 6 October 2025.

crucial to understanding a state's politics of perception as part of its foreign policy toolkit. For instance, Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid described the deaths of Pakistani soldiers as casualties in 'retaliatory attacks'. In contrast, Pakistan's daily *Dawn* ran a striking headline: '23 troops martyred, 200 Taliban and affiliated terrorists killed in border skirmishes with Afghanistan: ISPR'.⁸ Therefore, on the one hand, the Afghan narrative sought to place the onus for the outbreak of conflict on Pakistan and to present its response as defensive within its *jus ad bellum* (right to war). On the other hand, the Pakistani state attempted to project the casualties of Afghan Taliban fighters and alleged TTP members collectively as losses inflicted on terrorists.

This marks a significant shift in Pakistan's foreign policy towards Afghanistan since 2021, when former Prime Minister Imran Khan supported the Taliban's return to power, remarking that Afghans had 'broken the shackles of slavery'. By comparing its soldiers to martyrs, Islamabad also sought to evoke sympathy for its counterterrorism campaign against the TTP, which it labels *Fitna-al-Khawarij* (sedition of the Khawarij). The use of this Islamic term serves to delegitimise the TTP's insurgency as the actions of renegades against the supposed upholders of Islam—Pakistan itself. In doing so, Islamabad has implicitly accused the Afghan Taliban of being renegades, a derogatory characterisation. Since returning to power in August 2021, the Taliban has faced repeated accusations of harbouring TTP militants on Afghan soil—claims it has denied, asserting that TTP attacks are an internal issue for Pakistan to resolve.

Interestingly, symbolism and social media have assumed significant value in the current phase of Afghanistan–Pakistan relations. For instance, as videos showing Afghan Taliban fighters parading in the uniforms and tanks of captured Pakistani soldiers or deserters circulated widely on social media, Afghan journalists and activists labelled the moment as the '93,000 Pants Ceremony 2.0'. They used this symbolic reference to draw parallels with Pakistan's surrender of 93,000 soldiers during the 1971 India–Pakistan war.⁹

Meanwhile, in assessing the ongoing narrative warfare, both Afghanistan and Pakistan have adopted offensive tones and sought competing international coverage. For Pakistan in particular, this has occurred despite a lack of evidence confirming the neutralisation of TTP hideouts or militants within Afghanistan. Instead of achieving its intended objectives, Islamabad has conducted deadly airstrikes resulting in numerous civilian casualties and repeated violations of Afghan sovereignty and territorial integrity. Moreover, it has reverted to its long-standing

⁸ Tahir Khan, ["23 Troops Martyred, 200 Taliban and Affiliated Terrorists Killed in Border Skirmishes with Afghanistan: ISPR"](#), *DAWN*, 12 October 2025.

⁹ ["Here's Why '93,000' is Trending After Taliban Parade Pants of Pakistani Soldiers Amid Border Clashes"](#), *Free Press Journal*, 17 October 2025.

false narratives—shifting the blame for bilateral conflicts or domestic security challenges onto India, while portraying the Afghan Taliban as an Indian proxy. Overall, an important question raised by Amin Saikal, an Adjunct Professor at the University of Western Australia, will likely determine the future trajectory of Afghanistan–Pakistan relations over the next decade: “Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban avoid a deeper war for now, but how long can the peace hold?”¹⁰

Conclusion

South Asia is witnessing new alignments, with divergences between old allies (the Afghan Taliban and Pakistan) and convergences between new partners (India and the Afghan Taliban). As Afghanistan under Taliban 2.0 engages more proactively with the international community, powers like China may encourage it to reassess its tense posture towards Pakistan—a long-standing ally of Beijing—potentially easing border hostilities, at least temporarily. Conversely, Afghanistan and Pakistan could enter a state of frozen conflict, with the border remaining a flashpoint amid intensifying mistrust, Pakistani airstrikes, and an escalating TTP insurgency against the Pakistani state.

Overall, the souring of ties between Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban appears to have been the primary catalyst for the Taliban’s outreach to India. Yet, it is equally possible that the interim Afghan leadership seeks to hedge its bets against Pakistan and project its engagement with India as an alternative regional partnership. This raises the question of whether this represents a non-kinetic attempt by the Afghan Taliban to make the Pakistani state aware of the short-term implications of repeated air assaults on its soil under the guise of counterterror operations targeting alleged TTP hideouts.

India, meanwhile, must leverage its engagement with the Taliban and its soft-power diplomacy to secure guarantees for its development projects and to ensure that anti-India groups are not allowed to operate from Afghan soil. Further assistance, investment and engagement must be conditional on the Taliban demonstrating a credible commitment to addressing these concerns. India may also seek to leverage its diplomatic presence in Kabul to counter anti-India militant or extremist activity within Afghanistan, for which pragmatic cooperation with the Taliban remains necessary. Finally, India must strengthen its intelligence gathering and response mechanisms to expand its regional strategic footprint, benefit from connectivity projects through Afghanistan, and shield itself from radicalisation spillovers or entanglement in proxy rivalries within its broader neighbourhood.

¹⁰ Amin Saikal, “[Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban Avoid a Deeper War For Now, But How Long Can the Peace Hold?](#)”, *The Conversation*, 20 October 2025.

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