



Analytical Review

THE 2026 PAKISTAN–AFGHANISTAN CONFLICT: SECURITY DILEMMAS, HISTORICAL GRIEVANCES, AND REGIONAL STABILITY IMPLICATIONS

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Correspondence: Zaigham J.

Kayani, Editor in Chief, broadcaster, journalist, and media producer in the digital news and media sector.

Zaigham J. Kayani

Broadcaster, Journalist, Media Producer, Editor in Chief, and Chief Executive Officer, Media South Asia Canada Inc.

zjkayani@gmail.com | +1 (647) 285-5959 | Toronto, Canada.

[Facebook](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Instagram](#)

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Additional information is available at the end of the article.

Abstract

The February 2026 Pakistan Afghanistan crisis marked the sharpest rupture in ties since the Taliban returned to power in 2021. Border clashes along the Durand Line escalated into Pakistani airstrikes on militant targets inside Afghanistan, followed by Taliban retaliation and wider cross border fighting, with Pakistan framing the campaign as self defence against TTP sanctuaries. Even with Pakistan's stronger conventional air power, the conflict is unlikely to produce a clear victory because militant safe havens, disputed borders, refugee tensions, and deep cross border tribal links all make escalation easier and settlement harder. International reactions have largely centered on restraint and mediation, and any lasting de escalation will require credible counterterror coordination, firmer border management, and outside diplomatic pressure.

Keywords: Pakistan Afghanistan 2026 conflict, Durand Line dispute, TTP, Operation Ghazab Lil Haq, security dilemma, Pashtun dynamics, regional security, proxy conflict, cross border militancy

About author

Zaigham J. Kayani is a Toronto-based journalist, broadcaster, and public servant with over 30 years of experience in mass communication and community leadership. He holds a master's degree in mass communication from Allama Iqbal Open University, Pakistan. He began his career in Pakistan in the 1990s, working as a journalist and sub-editor at *Daily Khabrain*, later serving as Editor of the *South Asian Times*. He also hosted programs for the Pakistan Broadcasting Corporation, focusing on youth, education, and social issues. In Canada, Mr. Kayani has contributed extensively to multicultural media, hosting programs on WTOR 770 AM, CFRM FM Saskatoon, and appearing on TV Shalimar. His work promotes cross-cultural dialogue and amplifies South Asian community voices. Alongside his media career, he has been active in public service, running as an NDP candidate in Saskatchewan (2016) and Brampton West (2025), advocating for healthcare, affordability, and social justice. He currently serves as CEO of Media South Asia Canada Inc., leading initiatives in multicultural media and community engagement.

Data Source: Archives, Biographies, Databanks, Encyclopedias, Libraries, Metadata Registries, Reports, Repositories, arXiv, Crossref, OpenAI, Wikipedia, World Health Organization, Zenodo.

Conflict of Interest Statement: The author declares all potential conflicts of interest and affirms that any such interests have been appropriately disclosed in accordance with standard ethical guidelines.

AI Tools and Assistance Statement: Artificial intelligence tools were utilized to support content structuring, data analysis, and evidence synthesis. All outputs were critically reviewed and validated by the author, who assumes full responsibility for the accuracy, interpretation, and conclusions of the work.

Peer Review Statement: This manuscript has not undergone external peer review, as it represents a structured synthesis and analysis of existing evidence. The methodological approach adheres to established standards to ensure rigor, transparency, and scientific validity.

Data Synthesis and Analysis

Data were synthesized using meta-analysis (fixed/random effects) with heterogeneity assessed by I^2 and Cochran's Q. Where pooling was not feasible, narrative and thematic syntheses were applied. Network meta-analysis and meta-regression were conducted where appropriate, in accordance with PRISMA and Cochrane guidelines.

Introduction:

On 21 February 2026, the Pakistan Air Force initiated targeted strikes against TTP-linked installations in Afghanistan's eastern provinces, triggering a rapid escalation that culminated in Defence Minister Khawaja Muhammad Asif's declaration of "open war" on 27 February. Pakistani operations under the codename Operation Ghazab Lil Haq struck verified TTP command nodes in Spin Ghar mountains (Nangarhar), Shawal valley (Paktika), and Khost province, while Afghan Taliban forces responded with coordinated assaults on Pakistani border posts at Torkham, Chaman, and Qilla Saifullah sectors. As of 24 March 2026, both sides report cumulative casualties exceeding 800 (Pakistani claims: 450+ Taliban fighters neutralized;

Afghan claims: 120+ Pakistani personnel and civilian deaths), with ongoing mortar exchanges, drone deployments, and civilian displacements affecting Pashtun-majority districts.

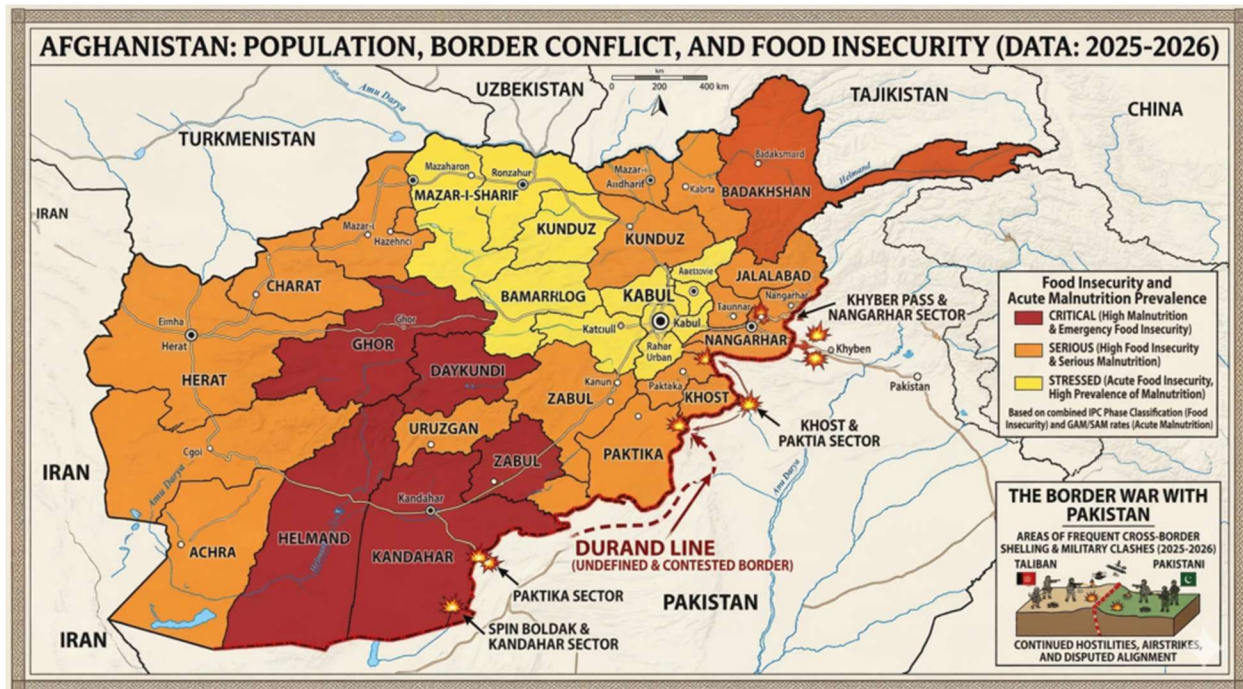


amu.tv

Pakistan's defense minister admits to decades of support to terrorists | Amu TV

Figure 1: *Pakistan Defence Minister Khawaja Muhammad Asif, who formally announced “open war” on 27 February 2026 (official portrait).*

This review applies structural realist and constructivist lenses to demonstrate how defensive measures by one actor are interpreted as offensive by the other, creating a classic security dilemma amplified by colonial-era borders, ethnic solidarities, and external patronage networks.



worldhunger.org

Figure 2: Visual Overview of the Conflict Zone (2025–2026 Projection)

Increased Hunger and Conflict in Afghanistan - World Hunger News

Detailed cartographic infographic highlighting the Durand Line, key conflict sectors (Nangarhar, Khost, Paktika, Kandahar), food insecurity overlays, and cross-border clash zones—illustrating the geographic and humanitarian scope of the escalation.

Historical Context: The Durand Line, Post-2021 Shifts, and Refugee Dynamics The 1893 Durand Line Agreement, negotiated by Sir Mortimer Durand with Afghan Amir Abdur Rahman Khan, established the modern boundary yet was never ratified by subsequent Afghan governments. Afghanistan's formal non-recognition—reiterated in 1949 under King Zahir Shah and again in 1970s Pashtunistan campaigns—has sustained irredentist claims over Pashtun lands. Post-1947, the border became a conduit for insurgencies: Soviet-era mujahideen sanctuaries (1980s), post-2001 Taliban resurgence, and TTP formation in 2007.



news.az

Figure 3: Highlighted map of the Durand Line and adjacent regions, showing Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, FATA, and Balochistan in relation to Afghan provinces. (What is driving the latest Pakistan–Afghanistan military confrontation? - Expert explains | News.az)

Pakistan initially extended diplomatic recognition to the Taliban-led government in September 2021, anticipating economic dividends via China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) Phase II extensions into Afghanistan. However, TTP attacks escalated dramatically: the 2023 Peshawar Mosque bombing (101 deaths) and 2024–2025 suicide operations in North Waziristan and Balochistan were traced to Afghan soil under TTP emir Noor Wali Mehsud. Islamabad's response included the 2024–2025 repatriation of 1.2 million Afghan refugees (primarily Pashtun and Hazara groups), condemned by UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration as violating non-refoulement principles. From Kabul's vantage, these policies reflect hegemonic interference reminiscent of Pakistan's 1990s support for Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-i-Islami against the Rabbani government.

Recent Escalations: Operational Timeline and Tactical Developments

Table 1: Timeline of Key Escalation Events (February–March 2026)

Date	Event	Location	Key Outcome / Claim
21 Feb 2026	PAF precision airstrikes on TTP camps	Nangarhar (Achin), Khost	Elimination of key TTP commanders
26–27 Feb 2026	Afghan ground offensives & Pakistani retaliation (Operation Ghazab Lil Haq)	Torkham, Chaman, Kabul outskirts, Kandahar	Secondary explosions at weapons depots
28 Feb 2026	Drone strike on mosque; continuous artillery duels	Bannu district (Pakistan)	17 civilians injured (mostly Wazir tribes)
2 Mar 2026	Taliban Supreme Leader offers unconditional talks	Radio Shariat broadcast	Pragmatic recognition of airpower asymmetry
5–10 Mar 2026	UNSC emergency consultations & SCO virtual mediation	New York / Virtual	Draft Resolution 2722; calls for ceasefire
24 Mar 2026	Ongoing drone patrols & mortar exchanges	Spin Ghar & Shawal valley	Cumulative casualties >800

Pakistan’s technological edge provides tactical leverage, yet Taliban resilience—rooted in Pashtun societal structures and guerrilla doctrine—suggests a protracted hybrid stalemate.



en.wikipedia.org CAC/PAC JF-17 Thunder - Wikipedia

Figure 4: Pakistan Air Force JF-17 Thunder – primary platform deployed in Operation Ghazab Lil Haq airstrikes.



[latimes.com](https://www.latimes.com)

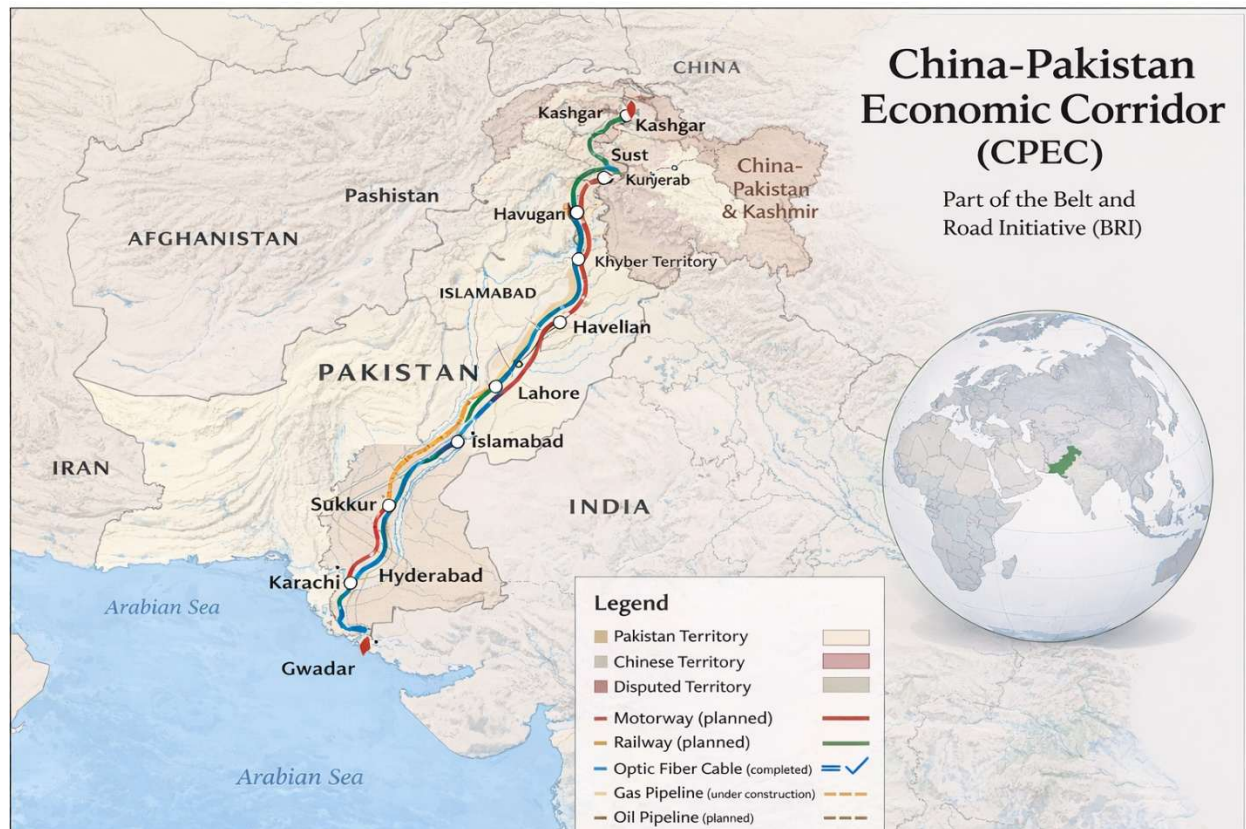
***Figure 5:** Taliban fighters in mountainous terrain typical of the Durand Line border regions, illustrating asymmetric guerrilla capabilities.*

Pakistan and Afghanistan claim killing dozens of the other side's troops in relentless fighting - Los Angeles Times

Theoretical Analysis: Causes, Motivations, and Ethnic Constraints Neorealist theory frames the conflict as a security dilemma: Pakistan's pre-emptive doctrine—articulated in COAS General Syed Asim Munir's February 2026 speeches—views Afghan tolerance of TTP sanctuaries as an existential threat to territorial integrity, especially in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Intelligence linkages between TTP, BLA, and alleged external actors (Iranian border networks) justified calibrated escalation.

Constructivist elements underscore identity politics. Shared Pashtun ethnicity (approximately 15–20 million across the border, encompassing Mehsud, Wazir, Afridi, and Shinwari tribes) generates ontological security constraints: mass casualties risk alienating domestic Pashtun constituencies and fueling irredentist mobilization. The Taliban supreme leader Hibatullah Akhundzada's post-strike offer of unconditional talks reflects pragmatic recognition of airpower asymmetry, while Pakistan rejects dialogue pending verifiable TTP crackdowns. Economic vulnerabilities further limit escalation: Pakistan's ongoing IMF Extended Fund Facility negotiations and CPEC debt servicing contrast with Afghanistan's humanitarian collapse (UN World Food Programme warnings of famine in Kandahar and Herat).

Regional and International Implications The conflict intersects multiple security complexes. The United States, via Secretary of State Antony Blinken's 28 February statement, affirmed Pakistan's "inherent right to self-defence" while urging restraint, aligning with counterterrorism priorities. China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi, during a 5 March Shanghai Cooperation Organisation virtual meeting, pressed for immediate de-escalation to safeguard CPEC infrastructure (Gwadar port and Karachi–Peshawar rail links). India's Ministry of External Affairs highlighted humanitarian corridors and increased aid to Kabul, prompting Pakistani accusations of exploiting Afghan territory as a proxy base.



eurasiareview.com

Figure 6: China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) routes with potential extensions into Afghanistan – highlighting economic stakes vulnerable to prolonged conflict.

CPEC's Expansion Into Afghanistan: A Strategic Game-Changer For South Asia's Future – OpEd – Eurasia Review

Iran has closed border crossings at Taftan and expressed concern over Baloch spillover, while Central Asian states (Uzbekistan, Tajikistan) monitor refugee flows. UN Security Council emergency consultations (Resolution 2722 draft, 10 March) called for ceasefire and mediation; Qatar and Saudi Arabia offered hosting facilities. Biased reporting—Pakistan's Inter-Services Public Relations emphasis on Taliban aggression versus Afghan narratives of civilian toll in Kunar and Logar—complicates global consensus.

Pathways to Resolution and Policy Recommendations De-escalation requires sequenced confidence-building: (1) immediate humanitarian corridors at Torkham and Chaman; (2) joint intelligence-sharing mechanisms targeting TTP emir Noor Wali Mehsud's networks; (3) formal Durand Line management protocols under UN auspices; and (4) economic incentives via revived CPEC–Afghanistan linkages. Third-party mediation through the SCO, UNAMA, or Qatar-hosted trilateral talks (involving Pakistan, Afghanistan, and China) offers the most viable route. Absent these, risks include BLA–TTP convergence in Balochistan, Iranian proxy activation, and great-power realignment that could destabilize the entire Eurasian rimland.

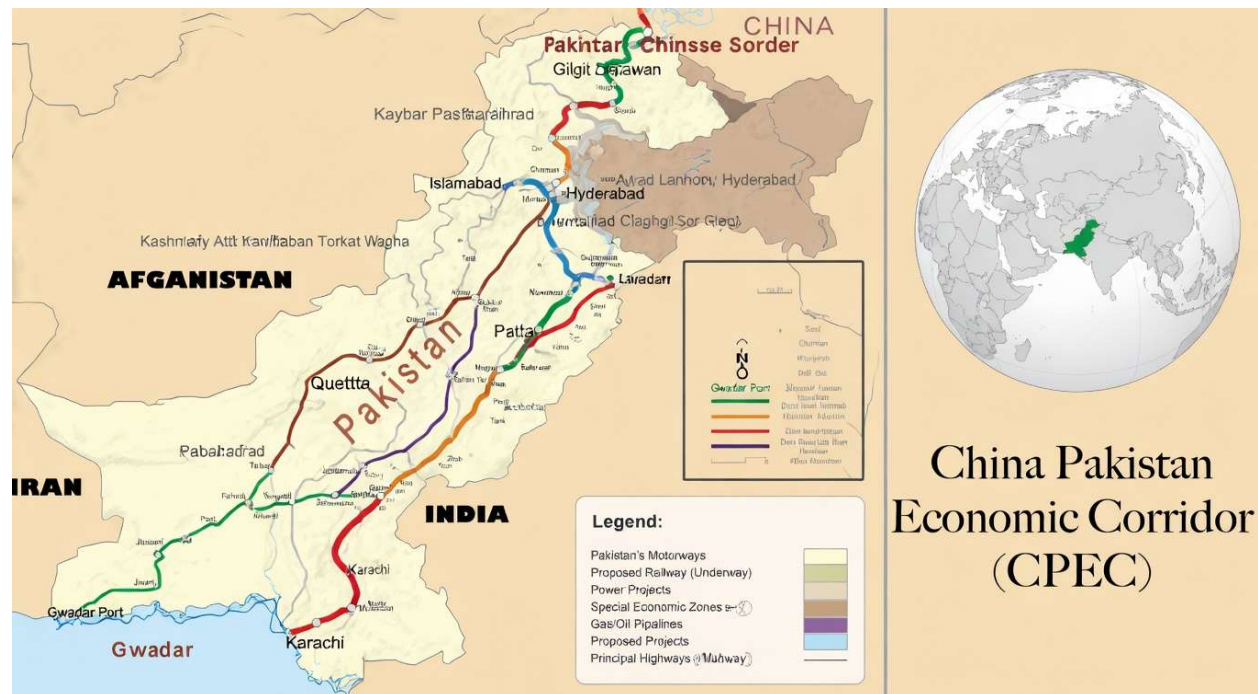


Figure 7. The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

Conclusion The 2026 Pakistan–Afghanistan conflict transcends a bilateral border dispute, embodying unresolved colonial legacies, transnational militancy, ethnic transnationalism, and great-power competition within South Asia's regional security complex. Pakistan's technological edge provides tactical leverage, yet Taliban resilience—rooted in Pashtun societal structures and guerrilla doctrine—suggests a protracted hybrid stalemate. Sustainable resolution demands transcending zero-sum paradigms through mutual border recognition, verifiable counterterrorism cooperation, and inclusive regional architectures. Without urgent multilateral intervention, the conflict threatens cascading instability across South and Central Asia, with Pashtun, Baloch, and Hazara civilian populations bearing the heaviest humanitarian burden. The international community must prioritize preventive diplomacy to avert a wider conflagration in an already volatile Eurasian theater.



Ethical Statement This manuscript is based solely on retrospective analysis of publicly available secondary data and does not involve primary data collection, human subjects, or confidential information; therefore, ethical approval and informed consent were not required. All sources are appropriately cited. AI-assisted tools were used only for information retrieval and organization, with full analytical responsibility retained by the author.

Editorial Statement This is a research-based manuscript, prepared and structured in a scientific narrative review format. Modern AI-assisted tools were used to access current and authentic information from digital archives, bibliographic databanks, online libraries, research articles, academic repositories, and encyclopedias.

Preprint Notice This manuscript is shared as a non-peer-reviewed preprint on platforms such as Zenodo, SSRN, and Research Square to support scholarly discussion. The content is research-based and developed using publicly available and verifiable sources. Readers are encouraged to interpret the material as preliminary and subject to revision.

Disclaimer This non-peer-reviewed article is shared for general academic discussion. AI tools were used to assist with clarity and organization. Readers are advised to independently assess and verify the information.

Literature Search and Information Management

Literature retrieval was conducted using a structured and reproducible search strategy in accordance with PRISMA-S reporting standards. Search strategies were independently evaluated using the PRESS framework to ensure methodological quality, accuracy, and completeness. Grey literature was systematically identified using the CADTH *Grey Matters* framework to enhance coverage of unpublished, non-indexed, and policy-relevant sources, thereby minimizing publication bias and improving evidence comprehensiveness.

Risk of Bias and Evidence Quality

Risk of bias was assessed using validated, design-specific tools (RoB 2, ROBINS-I, QUADAS-2/3, AMSTAR 2, Newcastle–Ottawa Scale, and CASP). The certainty of evidence and strength of recommendations were evaluated using the GRADE framework, ensuring a standardized and reproducible assessment across study designs.

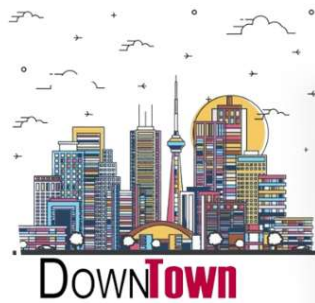
Review Typology and Reporting

Review designs were classified into standard categories (scoping, umbrella, rapid, qualitative, and mixed-methods), with reporting aligned to established guidelines (PRISMA-ScR, PRIOR, PRISMA-RR, ENTREQ, and PRISMA/MMAT) to ensure methodological rigor and transparency.



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