

# Pakistan: Responding to the Militant Surge on the Afghan Border

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## Principal Findings

**What's new?** Islamabad's relations with Kabul, already strained by increasing militant attacks in Pakistan's western borderlands, have neared breaking point following clashes with Taliban forces in October 2025. Islamabad holds the Taliban responsible for the wave of militancy, saying they provide haven to the jihadist Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan. Kabul denies it.

**Why does it matter?** Islamabad vows it will strike across the border again if Kabul does not act to corral Pakistani militants in Afghan territory. With talks mediated by Qatar and Türkiye stalling in November, and insurgent attacks claiming more Pakistani lives since then, the risk of fresh hostilities between the neighbours is high.

**What should be done?** The two sides should resolve their differences through dialogue brokered by friendly countries. But to better counter militancy in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, adjacent to Afghanistan, Islamabad should also rethink its own response, consulting locals on counter-insurgency strategy and improving collaboration between the military and provincial law enforcement.

## Executive Summary

Militant attacks in Pakistan's western borderlands are surging, killing hundreds of civilians, police and soldiers, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province next to Afghanistan. The jihadist Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP, or Pakistani Taliban) and its affiliates are responsible for most of the mayhem. Islamabad holds Kabul responsible, accusing the Afghan Taliban of refusing to act against the Pakistani militants based in Afghan territory. Kabul retorts that the TTP insurgency is a homegrown problem. Rising tensions led to clashes between Pakistani and Afghan Taliban forces in October 2025, and another flare-up looms unless Kabul does far more to prevent cross-border incursions. Friendly countries should work to restart dialogue. Meanwhile, Islamabad should ease economic pressures on Kabul by resuming trade. An effective counter-insurgency effort in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa will also require addressing local concerns and improving collaboration between the military and provincial police, including by building the latter's capacity to counter militancy.

As militant attacks in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa spike, the Pakistani government accuses the Afghan Taliban of actively supporting the Pakistani Taliban, with whom they share ethnic and ideological bonds. Noting the warmer relations between the Afghan Taliban and its arch-rival India, Islamabad says Kabul is in cahoots with New Delhi in this endeavour. Rejecting Islamabad's allegations, the Afghan Taliban insist that Pakistan alone bears responsibility for reining in the TTP, as the group's grievances are with the Pakistani state. Publicly, they deny that TTP fighters are present on Afghan soil.

With its patience strained, Islamabad has shifted from diplomacy to coercion. In October 2025, it retaliated with armed force for militant attacks that had killed dozens of its troops in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Clashes and counter-clashes between Pakistani and Afghan forces that month could have taken an even more serious turn without external mediation. Kabul and Islamabad agreed to a ceasefire during talks sponsored by Qatar and Türkiye. Though the truce remains in place, the talks have stalled since November, with no consensus on the way forward. As militant attacks

continue, Islamabad warns that it reserves the right to strike across the border. If it does so, the risk of hostilities with Afghanistan will rise.

Islamabad has tried to put pressure on Kabul in other ways as well. It has imposed economic sanctions, by closing borders and barring bilateral trade. It has also hardened its stance toward Afghan nationals living in Pakistan, expelling hundreds of thousands of refugees, including the most vulnerable – women and girls, journalists and rights defenders. It now requires that any Afghan wishing to remain in the country – even someone with UN refugee status – obtain a visa.

Yet infiltration from Afghanistan is not the state's only problem in containing militancy in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The powerful military has taken the lead in fighting the militants, who have the provincial police force outgunned. But limited coordination between the military and police has undermined the counter-insurgency campaign. Political factionalism creates additional hurdles. The party in charge of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's government (and therefore provincial law enforcement) is Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, led by the jailed former prime minister, Imran Khan. Khan's party believes the military should give up the reins of the counter-insurgency effort. It also rejects Islamabad's attempts to strong-arm the Afghan Taliban.

Islamabad is at risk of losing hearts and minds. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's main political parties agree on the need to battle militants, but they feel the military's heavy-handed measures have hurt the wellbeing of their constituents. The province's people are angered by the state's failure to protect them from the TTP, but they also resent counter-insurgency tactics – for instance, evacuations that cause mass displacement – that adversely affect their lives and livelihoods. Women and girls are among those who have suffered the most.

There is no easy solution for the resurgence of militancy, given its scale. But the authorities could make a start by improving collaboration between the military and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's law enforcement agencies, as well as between the federal and provincial governments writ large. To ensure local buy-in, state forces should also take the concerns of residents, including women, into account when conducting counter-insurgency operations. A better equipped and trained provincial police force that draws on intelligence to pursue targeted investigations and arrest of suspects, while also taking care to prevent civilian harm, would be more effective in countering the militant surge.

A bigger challenge lies ahead: reducing frictions between Islamabad and Kabul, and thus the risk of further deadly cross-border exchanges. Islamabad is justifiably furious at the TTP's incursions. Kabul should police the border more robustly to curb the militant attacks. For its part, rather than holding fast to pressure tactics on Kabul that have yielded few benefits, Pakistan should lift its ban on bilateral trade, which has hit Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's economy hard, sapping the incomes of merchants, transporters and workers alike. Resuming commerce would win Islamabad good-will among Pakistani citizens as well as Afghans who are just as dependent on such trade.

A more nuanced policy toward Afghan refugees is also in Pakistan's interest, as the current approach does little to enhance national security even as it fuels anti-Pakistani sentiment in Afghanistan. Islamabad is unlikely to abandon its new visa policy. But it can and should expedite the provision and/or extension of visas for

those already in the country, particularly those most in need of protection.

A renewed high-level dialogue between Islamabad and Kabul does not appear on the cards for now. But fighting is not the answer. Instead, by sitting across the table at negotiations mediated by friendly states such as Qatar, Türkiye and Saudi Arabia, the two countries can at the very least convey their red lines to each other. Such talks will require patience from both sides, but the alternative, a resumption of armed conflict, is a far worse option.

**Islamabad/Brussels, 27 February 2026**

## I. Introduction

Pakistan's relations with Afghanistan have reached a new low following a series of lethal border clashes in October 2025. The fighting was triggered by a surge in Islamist militant attacks, the deadliest in over a decade, in Pakistan's western borderlands.<sup>1</sup> Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, abutting Afghanistan, has borne the brunt of militant violence. The jihadist Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP, also known as the Pakistani Taliban) and its affiliates, such as the Hafiz Gul Bahadur Group, are responsible for much of the bloodshed.

Created in 2007, the TTP is a coalition of Islamist, mainly Pashtun, militant groups. These had gained a power base in regions bordering Afghanistan, particularly in what were then the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) adjacent to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, which were governed from the federal capital Islamabad through dysfunctional and repressive political, legal and administrative structures dating to the colonial era.<sup>2</sup> As the Pakistani military dislodged the TTP from FATA and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in the mid-2000s, the group's leaders and thousands of fighters relocated to Afghanistan, where they were given sanctuary in areas controlled by the Taliban during their war with Western forces.<sup>3</sup>

Since the Afghan Taliban retook power in mid-2021, the TTP has been attempting to make a comeback across the border, particularly in the former FATA, which Islamabad folded into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2018.<sup>4</sup> The group opposes the merger, which extended the federal judiciary's reach over the region and provided political and constitutional rights to residents.<sup>5</sup>

Islamabad holds the Afghan Taliban authorities responsible for the militant surge, alleging that TTP leaders and fighters use Afghan havens to attack neighbouring Pakistani regions. As deaths among soldiers, police and civilians in jihadist attacks

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<sup>1</sup> For earlier analysis of jihadist violence in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and its impact on relations with Afghanistan, see Crisis Group Commentaries, "[Ten Conflicts to Watch in 2026](#)", 31 December 2025; "[Pakistan-Afghanistan: Tempering the Deportation Drive](#)", 22 May 2025; "[Pakistan at the Tipping Point](#)", 12 May 2023; and "[With the Taliban Back in Kabul, Regional Powers Watch and Wait](#)", 26 August 2021; Samina Ahmed, "[The Pakistani Taliban Test Ties between Islamabad and Kabul](#)", Crisis Group Commentary, 29 March 2023; Crisis Group Asia Reports N°327, [A New Era of Sectarian Violence in Pakistan](#), 13 April 2022; N°321, [Women and Peacebuilding in Pakistan's North West](#), 14 February 2022; N°320, [Pakistan's Hard Policy Choices in Afghanistan](#), 4 February 2022; N°271, [Revisiting Counter-terrorism Strategies in Pakistan: Opportunities and Pitfalls](#), 22 July 2015; N°265, [Women, Violence and Conflict in Pakistan](#), 8 April 2015; N°262, [Resetting Pakistan's Relations with Afghanistan](#), 28 October 2014; N°242, [Pakistan: Countering Militancy in FATA](#), 15 January 2013; and N°178, [Pakistan: Countering Militancy in FATA](#), 21 October 2009; and Crisis Group Asia Briefings N°169 [Shoring Up Afghanistan's Peace Process](#), 30 June 2021; and N°150 [Shaping a New Peace in Pakistan's Tribal Areas](#), 20 August 2018. See also "Counter-terrorism operations", *Dawn*, 1 February 2025.

<sup>2</sup> FATA's governance was based on the Frontier Crimes Regulations (1901). Crisis Group Report, [Countering Militancy in FATA](#), op. cit.

<sup>3</sup> Crisis Group Report, [Pakistan's Hard Policy Choices in Afghanistan](#), op. cit.

<sup>4</sup> Militant violence in Pakistan has steadily risen since the Afghan Taliban's return to power, increasing by almost 38 per cent in 2021, over 15 per cent in 2022, 56 per cent in 2023, close to 67 per cent in 2024 and 34 per cent in 2025. "Annual Security Report 2025", Centre for Research and Security Studies, Islamabad, 31 December 2025. More than 3,500 Pakistani security personnel and civilians have been killed in TTP attacks since 2021. Maleeha Lodhi, "Frozen relationship", *Dawn*, 16 February 2026.

<sup>5</sup> Crisis Group Briefing, [Shaping a New Peace in Pakistan's Tribal Areas](#), op. cit.

mount, Islamabad accuses the Afghan Taliban authorities of refusing to act against the Pakistani Taliban.

Focusing on militant resurgence in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, this report examines the extent to which Islamabad's tensions with Kabul could, as in October 2025, provoke deadly conflict. Identifying ways of defusing bilateral tensions, the report also assesses the effectiveness of internal security policies and recommends measures for countering militancy. It is based on 94 interviews conducted between September 2024 and November 2025 in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Islamabad with Pakistani politicians, including parliamentarians; serving and former officials, including police officers and diplomats; religious scholars, civil society and NGO representatives, Pashtun businesspeople, traders and transporters, and political and security analysts. Women, including Pakistani women's rights advocates and Afghan women refugees, made up about a quarter of interlocutors.

## II. Militancy in the Western Borderlands

### A. The Militant Surge

Attacks in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa by the Pakistani Taliban and its affiliates have been on the rise. They started with the umbrella group's formation in 2007, and peaked in 2014, before tailing off as a result of the Pakistani military's counter-insurgency campaign, which pushed many TTP fighters into areas where NATO forces were deployed in Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup> The pace of attacks picked up again, however, soon after the Afghan Taliban seized power in Kabul in mid-2021. While violence declined for a few months in the second half of 2022, during talks between Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government and the TTP, mediated by the Afghan Taliban, it spiked again as negotiations broke down that November.<sup>7</sup>

Two years after the Taliban takeover, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa witnessed a 55 per cent increase in militant violence, with fatalities soaring to a six-year high.<sup>8</sup> Pakistani authorities – diplomats, police and military officers – attribute the TTP's resurgence in the province to the Afghan Taliban's return to power.<sup>9</sup> Politicians and civil society activists in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa believe that the Pakistani militants, whom they describe as the Afghan Taliban's "partners in arms", have been emboldened by the Afghan Taliban's victory over "a superpower".<sup>10</sup>

In mid-2024, Pakistan's apex security committee, chaired by the prime minister and attended by the army chief, announced more robust counter-insurgency measures.<sup>11</sup> Since then, these operations have gathered steam, killing hundreds of insurgents, but the wave of militancy has continued to swell.<sup>12</sup> With some 660 military and police personnel as well as 580 civilians killed in militant attacks, 2025 was the deadliest year in over a decade.<sup>13</sup> Khyber Pakhtunkhwa was the hardest-hit region, suffering 71

<sup>6</sup> This Pakistani campaign gained momentum after a December 2014 TTP attack on an army-run school in Peshawar, which left 150 dead, most of them students. See Crisis Group Report, [Revisiting Counter-terrorism Strategies in Pakistan](#), op. cit.

<sup>7</sup> See Crisis Group Report, [Pakistan's Hard Policy Choices in Afghanistan](#), op. cit.; and Crisis Group Commentary, ["The Pakistani Taliban Test Ties between Islamabad and Kabul"](#), op. cit.

<sup>8</sup> "Violence-linked fatalities hit six-year high", *Dawn*, 1 January 2024; Ismail Khan, "Can Kabul 'edict' ease anti-TTP pressure on Pakistan?", *Dawn*, 15 August 2023.

<sup>9</sup> Crisis Group interviews, officials, including a senior diplomat responsible for Afghanistan, Islamabad and Peshawar, November–December 2024. In December 2024, the interior ministry informed the federal parliament that the Afghan Taliban's victory "has emboldened the TTP militants to continue their activities in Pakistan without fear", adding that the TTP's central leadership "is now based in Afghanistan". "43 terrorists neutralised in K-P, Balochistan", *Dawn*, 14 December 2024. In January 2025, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's police chief told provincial lawmakers that most active militants were concentrated in the southern districts, due to a "still intact" network across the border. "Terrorists have safe havens in southern districts meeting told in KP", *Dawn*, 3 January 2025.

<sup>10</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Peshawar, Swat and Khyber districts, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, September 2024–January 2025.

<sup>11</sup> Operation Azm-i-Istehkam was announced in June 2024. "Operation Azm-i-Istehkam: Govt approves reinvigorated national counter-terror campaign", *Dawn*, 26 June 2024.

<sup>12</sup> The Pakistani military's spokesman said 1,667 TTP militants were killed in counter-insurgency operations in the first nine months of 2025. "India plans false flag operation in maritime domain, warns DG ISPR", *Dawn*, 3 November 2025.

<sup>13</sup> Militant attacks in 2025 killed 374 military personnel and 216 police. "Annual Security Report 2025", op. cit.; "Pakistan's 2025 counter-terrorism toll in 2025 surges 73pc as militancy hits multi-year highs", Pakistan Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies, 28 December 2025.

per cent of the violent incidents and nearly 68 per cent of the related fatalities, with responsibility for the attacks primarily claimed by the TTP and its affiliates.<sup>14</sup> Locals live daily with the consequences of the militant surge.<sup>15</sup> In many southern districts, residents fear travelling after sunset, including on national highways.<sup>16</sup> A common local saying is “the day belongs to the military; the night, to the militant”. But increasingly, locals say, they hear a grim variant: “even the day belongs to the militants”.<sup>17</sup>

## B. Islamabad’s Claims and Kabul’s Denials

As the military routed the TTP in the mid-2010s, the group’s leaders and thousands of fighters fled into Afghanistan. Many went to insurgent-contested areas, where they fought U.S.-led forces alongside their Afghan Taliban counterparts. As the Taliban rapidly gained territory in mid-2021, thousands escaped from the country’s prisons, including hundreds of Pakistani Taliban leaders, commanders and fighters. Hundreds more were freed after the Afghan Taliban took over in Kabul.<sup>18</sup> In 2022, Islamabad made a deal with the TTP, brokered by the Afghan Taliban, that allowed hundreds of fighters to return to Pakistan still bearing arms. But thousands, along with TTP’s top leaders, remained in Afghanistan.<sup>19</sup> Pakistani officials now contend that, with the Taliban in power, all of Afghanistan serves as “one big sanctuary” for the Pakistani Taliban, and that scores of militants, including Afghan nationals, have slipped across the border to carry out attacks in Pakistan.<sup>20</sup> In November 2025, the military spokesperson accused Afghan Taliban forces of facilitating such infiltration with covering fire upon Pakistani border posts.<sup>21</sup>

Pakistani officials blame Afghan nationals for some of the country’s most high-profile attacks, such as the November 2025 raid on a cadet college in Wana, a town in South Waziristan, and the suicide bombing outside a court in Islamabad. Informed observers in bordering districts such as Khyber concur: “Following the NATO withdrawal [from Afghanistan], Afghans who back the Pakistani insurgents are attacking across the border alongside TTP militants”.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>14</sup> “DG ISPR assails PTI for seeking Kabul’s support amid rising terror incidents in KP”, *The News*, 6 January 2026; “Terror violence surges 25% in 11 months of 2025”, *The Express Tribune*, 4 December 2025.

<sup>15</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, September 2024; November 2025.

<sup>16</sup> The southern districts include North Waziristan, South Waziristan, Lakki Marwat, Bannu, Dera Ismail Khan, Kohat, Tank and Karak.

<sup>17</sup> Crisis Group interviews, residents, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, September–November 2024.

<sup>18</sup> Abdul Sayed and Tore Hamming, “The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan after the Taliban’s Afghanistan Takeover”, *CTC Sentinel*, May 2023.

<sup>19</sup> Crisis Group Report, *Pakistan’s Hard Policy Choices in Afghanistan*, op. cit. See also UN Security Council, “Thirty-seventh report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2734 (2024) concerning ISIL (Da’esh), Al-Qaeda and associated individuals and entities”, S/2026/44, 4 February 2026.

<sup>20</sup> “Pak-Afghan tit-for-tat continues”, *The Express Tribune*, 23 August 2025. Army chief Asim Munir has alleged that “in the TTP formations coming [into] Pakistan, 70 per cent are Afghans”. “TTP formations infiltrating into Pakistan mostly comprise Afghans: CDM Field Marshal Asim Munir”, *Dawn*, 21 December 2025. Earlier, the defence minister said 2,500 to 3,000 militants had infiltrated in the past year alone. “Attack on terrorist sanctuaries in Afghanistan ‘cannot be ruled out’, Asif says after attacks rock Pakistan”, *Dawn*, 11 November 2025.

<sup>21</sup> Pakistan’s border fence, he added, could not prevent such infiltration since it is located some 15-25km from the border and, with too few observation posts, can easily be cut through. “Afghan forces open fire across border to facilitate infiltration of terrorists into Pakistan: DG ISPR”, *Dawn*, 29 November 2025.

<sup>22</sup> Crisis Group interviews, journalists, Khyber district, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, January 2025.

The Taliban takeover of Afghanistan was consequential in other ways, Pakistani sources say. State forces attribute the lethality of TTP attacks to the militants' acquisition of advanced weaponry that the departing U.S. and NATO forces left behind.<sup>23</sup>

Amid heightened tensions with India, particularly in the wake of the May 2025 hostilities, top officials in Islamabad, including the army chief and prime minister, also claim that Kabul is colluding with New Delhi to actively support the Pakistani Taliban.<sup>24</sup> Senior Pakistani diplomats have also warned foreign governments that the Afghan Taliban's active support for the TTP and the links of both to al-Qaeda could pose threats far outside the region.<sup>25</sup>

The Afghan authorities flatly deny Pakistan's accusations, insisting that the TTP is solely a Pakistani phenomenon, with only a handful of fighters remaining on Afghan soil after the 2022 deal.<sup>26</sup> The Taliban point out that the TTP is a homegrown Pakistani group whose presence in Afghanistan predates their return to power. They say dealing with the group is Pakistan's responsibility, since its roots lie in grievances with the Pakistani state.<sup>27</sup> They also reject Islamabad's allegations of militant cross-border movement, claiming that neither side can fully prevent infiltration across the porous frontier. They note that even the Pakistani military, equipped with advanced monitoring technology along the barbed-wire fence, has failed to prevent such incursions.<sup>28</sup>

Afghanistan's de facto authorities also allege that the country faces a cross-border threat of its own from the Islamic State's local franchise, the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-KP), which they claim has safe havens in Pakistan.<sup>29</sup> But Islamabad's crackdown on IS-KP, including the May 2025 arrest of its spokesman and head of its media cell, Sultan Aziz Azam, casts doubt on Kabul's claims that this group enjoys support from elements of the Pakistan state.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Crisis Group interviews, police officers, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa districts and Islamabad, October 2024. The U.S. left behind \$7.1 billion in weapons it had given to the Afghan defence forces. "Final Report, Seventeen Years of Reconstruction Oversight", Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, December 2025. In November 2025, Pakistan's UN ambassador told the Security Council that the acquisition of these weapons by Afghanistan-based groups, including the TTP and Balochistan Liberation Army, posed a "serious challenge to peace and security in Pakistan and the broader region". "Afghanistan-based terrorist groups' access to illicit arms threatens regional peace, Pakistan warns at UNSC debate", *Dawn*, 11 November 2025.

<sup>24</sup> Army chief Munir accused the Afghan Taliban of "providing all possible assistance" to the TTP and the Balochistan Liberation Army, calling both militant groups "Indian-sponsored terrorist proxies". "Pakistan seeks peace with all neighbours but will not allow cross-border terrorism from Afghanistan: COAS Munir", *Dawn*, 30 October 2025. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif attributed the November 2025 attacks on the Wana cadet college and near the Islamabad court to "India-backed networks". "CTD launches operation against Islamabad courthouse blast", *The Express Tribune*, 13 November 2025.

<sup>25</sup> "Pakistan asks UNSC to take action against terror threats from Afghanistan", *The News*, 12 February 2025.

<sup>26</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials, Kabul, 2023-2025. According to a well-informed former Pakistani diplomat, the Afghan Taliban acknowledge the TTP's presence in Afghanistan in talks with Pakistan, but claim they lack the capacity to restrain it. Maleeha Lodhi, "Pakistan's Afghan dilemma", *Dawn*, 24 July 2023.

<sup>27</sup> "Islamic Emirate denies Pakistani claims of TTP presence in Afghanistan", *Tolo News*, 27 May 2024.

<sup>28</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials, Kabul, 2023-2025.

<sup>29</sup> "Taliban claims ISKP leaders moved to Pakistan as security concerns mount", *Kabul Now*, September 2024.

<sup>30</sup> "Pakistan arrests IS-K spokesperson, UN hails move as major setback for group", *The Express Tribune*, 18 December 2025.

## C. TTP-Afghan Taliban Ties

The Pakistani Taliban have longstanding ethnic and ideological links with their Afghan counterparts. Both are predominantly Pashtun and subscribe to the Deobandi school of Sunni Islam.<sup>31</sup> Successive TTP heads (emirs) have sworn formal allegiance (*bayat*) to successive Taliban emirs. The last pledge was renewed on 17 August 2021, two days after the Taliban returned to power in Kabul.<sup>32</sup> “The Afghan Taliban and the TTP are fellow jihadists”, said an analyst who has worked extensively on both sides of the border. “They are unlikely to end that partnership.”<sup>33</sup>

When the Afghan Taliban fled the international forces in Afghanistan into Pakistan’s FATA in 2001, Pashtun jihadist groups gave them sanctuary and support.<sup>34</sup> The bonds grew stronger after these groups joined forces under the Tehreek-e-Taliban banner in 2007. After the Pakistani military crackdown on the TTP in the mid-2010s, it was the Afghan Taliban’s turn to aid their Pakistani brethren. TTP fighters and affiliates, particularly from the Hafiz Gul Bahadur Group, focused their attention on Pakistani targets but also fought NATO forces.<sup>35</sup> Today, the Pakistani and Afghan Taliban often tell stories of such jihadist camaraderie and mutual sacrifice.<sup>36</sup> A political leader from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa noted: “Pakistani militants would fight alongside the [Afghan] Taliban. Now the Afghan Taliban are returning the favour” by helping their Pakistani allies.<sup>37</sup>

Much of the TTP’s revival owes to its current chief, Noor Wali Mehsud. When he took over in mid-2018, the group, divided among warring factions, was in disarray. Mehsud has managed to reunite it, with several splinters rejoining under his watch; scores of affiliates also back the TTP, with the Gul Bahadur Group being one of the most prominent.<sup>38</sup>

The Afghan Taliban’s fight with international forces that culminated in their takeover of Afghanistan has inspired the TTP in more ways than one. The TTP’s messaging, that of a defensive “jihad” against “the invasion of their territories” by an external aggressor – in this case, the Pakistani state – echoes the Afghan Taliban’s justification for their battle to eject Western forces and their longstanding emphasis on limiting their objectives to the area inside Afghanistan’s borders. The TTP’s main goals are also parochial, as they seek to undo the 2018 merger of the former FATA with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and to impose sharia in their erstwhile stronghold.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Established in the 19th century in the Dar al Alum madrasa in Deoband (then in British India), the Deobandi school propagates an ultra-orthodox Hanafi interpretation of sharia or Islamic law.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas Joscelyn, “Pakistani Taliban’s emir renews allegiance to Afghan Taliban”, *Long War Journal*, 19 August 2021.

<sup>33</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Islamabad, September 2024.

<sup>34</sup> Crisis Group Report N°125, *Pakistan’s Tribal Areas: Appeasing the Militants*, 11 December 2006.

<sup>35</sup> Among other things, the TTP called for enforcing sharia and uniting against the NATO forces in Afghanistan. Hasan Abbas, “A Profile of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan”, *CTC Sentinel*, January 2008. See also Crisis Group Report, *Pakistan: Countering Militancy in FATA*, op. cit.

<sup>36</sup> A Taliban official said the TTP “fought and died for us”. Quoted in Zia Ur Rehman, “Rethinking the Taliban doctrine”, *Dawn*, 17 August 2025.

<sup>37</sup> Crisis Group interview, Islamabad, November 2025.

<sup>38</sup> Rehman, “Rethinking the Taliban doctrine”, op. cit.

<sup>39</sup> Muhammad Amir Rana, “Taliban version of Islam”, *Dawn*, 15 January 2023.

The TTP has also set up new administrative and organisational structures, called *wilayats*, replicating the Afghan Taliban's shadow governance during the war. By setting up such parallel structures in the former FATA, the group is depicting itself as a government-in-waiting rather than an insurgency.<sup>40</sup> But Khyber Pakhtunkhwa regions where the TTP once had a support base have witnessed mass protests by locals who oppose the militants' return. While the insurgents mainly target soldiers and police, scores of civilians end up caught in the crossfire as such attacks often take place in populated areas. Whenever civilians are killed, the TTP and its affiliates merely refrain from claiming responsibility, which does little to assuage local anger.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Faisal Ali Raja, "New wilayats of TTP", *The Express Tribune*, 5 July 2023.

<sup>41</sup> "Militancy-linked death toll among civilians 'jumps 80pc': report", *Dawn*, 2 December 2025.

### III. Mounting Conflict Risks

With TTP attacks surging and the death toll, particularly among state personnel, rising, Pakistan's Afghanistan policy has changed drastically – from defending the Afghan Taliban authorities abroad to becoming one of their fiercest detractors. Soon after the Taliban takeover, Islamabad portrayed itself as a bridge between Afghanistan's new rulers and the world, calling for international engagement with Kabul to help it address a major economic crisis.<sup>42</sup> But the Taliban's TTP connections have tested Islamabad's patience, and bilateral relations have hit rock bottom since the October 2025 border clashes. In international forums, including at the UN Security Council where Pakistan is currently a non-permanent member, Islamabad is now warning foreign governments of the threat to regional stability posed by the TTP and its collusion with the Afghan Taliban regime.<sup>43</sup>

#### A. Failed Negotiations

When the Afghan Taliban retook power, Islamabad was confident they would repay past favours, notably its provision of sanctuary in Pakistani territory from which the Taliban's high command oversaw the fight with NATO forces.<sup>44</sup> It had every expectation, in this vein, that Kabul would rein in the Pakistani Taliban. Its hopes were dashed, however. In response to Pakistan's concerns, Kabul declined to crack down, asking Islamabad to reach a negotiated settlement with the group instead.<sup>45</sup> Talks between the TTP and Prime Minister Khan's government, mediated by the Taliban's acting interior minister, Sirajuddin Haqqani, began soon after the Taliban takeover. In June 2022, the two sides agreed to a "ceasefire" and a range of "confidence-building measures", including the return of hundreds of TTP fighters from Afghanistan and the release of scores more jailed in Pakistan.<sup>46</sup>

Despite the ceasefire, the TTP continued sporadic attacks, and the talks soon became deadlocked. The Pakistani Taliban insisted on reversing the former FATA's merger with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and imposing sharia in the region, steps that were anathema to Islamabad, which for its part demanded that the militants disarm and accept the Pakistani constitution.<sup>47</sup>

Both sides dug in. By mid-2022, the new coalition government that had replaced Khan earlier that year decided to discontinue what it called his "policy of appeasement" of terrorists.<sup>48</sup> That November, the talks broke down, the TTP abandoned the

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<sup>42</sup> Crisis Group Report, *Pakistan's Hard Policy Choices in Afghanistan*, op. cit.

<sup>43</sup> In December 2025, Pakistan's UN representative warned the Security Council that Afghanistan was once again "a safe sanctuary for terrorist groups" such as the TTP, "threatening the security of its immediate neighbours, particularly Pakistan, and the region and beyond". "Pakistan says terrorism emanating from Afghan soil poses 'gravest threat' to national security, sovereignty", *Dawn*, 11 December 2025.

<sup>44</sup> Abubakar Siddique, "The Quetta Shura: Understanding the Afghan Taliban's Leadership", Jamestown Foundation, 21 February 2014; Antonio Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War, 2001-2018* (London, 2019).

<sup>45</sup> Ahmed, "The Pakistani Taliban Test Ties between Islamabad and Kabul", op. cit.

<sup>46</sup> Zahid Hussain, "Reviewing CT strategy", *Dawn*, 4 January 2023.

<sup>47</sup> Ahmed, "The Pakistani Taliban Test Ties between Islamabad and Kabul", op. cit.; Crisis Group Report, *Pakistan's Hard Policy Choices in Afghanistan*, op. cit.

<sup>48</sup> "Bilawal says PTI's policy of 'appeasing' TTP reversed", *The Express Tribune*, 4 January 2023. Khan had been ousted as prime minister in April 2022 after falling out with the military.

ceasefire and militant attacks in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa began to surge. In the province's cities and villages, including in the streets of South Waziristan and Bajaur districts and in Swat valley, which had witnessed a major bout of militant violence in 2008-2009, thousands turned out to protest the TTP insurgents' return.<sup>49</sup>

The spring of 2025 saw an effort at rapprochement. That April, at the urging of China, which was increasingly concerned about Pakistan's deteriorating relations with Afghanistan, Islamabad once again reached out to the Taliban authorities, sending its foreign minister to Kabul in hope of convincing them to corral the Pakistani Taliban.<sup>50</sup> Following the next month's hostilities with India, Pakistan was concerned about heightened insecurity on both its Indian and Afghan flanks. In a bid to pacify the latter border, it attempted to reset relations with the Taliban, upgrading diplomatic ties to ambassadorial level in June. Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar and Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi visited Kabul, with Naqvi claiming that the Taliban had agreed to curb TTP cross-border infiltration and to work with Pakistan on improving border management.<sup>51</sup>

Tensions soon resurfaced, however, amid the rising toll of military and civilian casualties in TTP attacks. "The Afghan government has included hundreds of pro-TTP elements in its governance fold", the Pakistani foreign minister now alleged.<sup>52</sup>

Islamabad also staked its claim that Indian authorities were complicit with the Afghan regime in spurring a spike in militant attacks on Pakistani territory. In September, militant attacks in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa increased by 74 per cent over the previous month, killing scores of soldiers and police and setting the stage for deadly clashes between the two countries the following month.<sup>53</sup>

## B. From Sporadic Clashes to Armed Conflict

Pakistani and Afghan forces have exchanged fire several times along the disputed border since the Taliban's return to power. These sporadic skirmishes were triggered by differences over the location of border posts and/or the route of Pakistan's fence.<sup>54</sup>

In 2024, Pakistan conducted at least two cross-border airstrikes, in April and December, claiming to have hit TTP bases in Afghan provinces.<sup>55</sup> But the most serious hostilities between the two countries were to come the following October.

### 1. Hostilities erupt

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<sup>49</sup> Crisis Group interviews, protest organisers and participants, Swat, October 2024.

<sup>50</sup> During a visit to Kabul, Pakistani Foreign Minister Dar emphasised "the paramount importance of addressing all pertinent issues, particularly those related to security and border management". "FM Dar says other side told won't allow each other to be used for terrorism", *Dawn*, 19 April 2025.

<sup>51</sup> "Pakistan, Afghanistan agree to step up counter-terrorism measures", *Dawn*, 21 July 2025.

<sup>52</sup> "Kabul has pro-TTP elements in its govt: Dar", *The News*, 30 August 2025.

<sup>53</sup> In October 2025, the military estimated that more than 300 soldiers and officers had been killed in militant attacks since the beginning of the year. According to the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa police, 79 police officers were killed in 605 militant attacks in the province in the first eight months of 2025. "K-P sees 605 terror attacks in 8 months", *The Express Tribune*, 8 September 2025; "KP govt must protect its people instead of begging Afghanistan for security: DG ISPR", *Dawn*, 10 October 2025.

<sup>54</sup> Pakistan has fenced the entirety of its 2,640km border with Afghanistan; construction began in 2017. The barrier consists of chain link fencing, supplemented by border outposts.

<sup>55</sup> "Pakistan conducts anti-terrorist operation in 'border areas based on security threats': FO", *Dawn*, 26 December 2024.

On 8 October 2025, TTP militants killed eleven Pakistani military personnel, including a lieutenant colonel and a major, during a clash in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Orakzai district. "Enough is enough", Pakistan's defence minister reacted, warning the Afghan Taliban authorities that Pakistani forces would now go after the TTP and its bases "wherever they are".<sup>56</sup> Hours later, Pakistan conducted two airstrikes that it neither acknowledged nor denied, including the first ever on Kabul and another on an Afghan border town. The target of the Kabul attack was reportedly TTP chief Noor Wali Mehsud.<sup>57</sup>

In the tit-for-tat attacks that followed on 11 and 12 October, Afghan Taliban forces struck Pakistani military installations along the border, claiming to have killed 58 Pakistani soldiers. Pakistan retaliated, bombarding sites on Afghan territory with heavy artillery and making ground incursions. It also carried out several airstrikes on Afghan border provinces, saying it was targeting "terrorist training facilities and support networks". Acknowledging the deaths of 23 soldiers in the Afghan attacks, the Pakistan military claimed to have killed 206 Taliban soldiers and another 112 TTP militants.<sup>58</sup>

The border confrontations took place while the Taliban's foreign minister Amir Khan Muttaqi was in New Delhi, on the first visit to India by a senior member of the Taliban administration. Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif insisted that Muttaqi's presence in India vindicated his government's claims that Kabul was in league with New Delhi in backing anti-Pakistan militants.<sup>59</sup>

Attacks and counter-attacks continued on 14 and 15 October, including Pakistani airstrikes on Kabul and Kandahar that Islamabad said were in retaliation for Afghan fire upon Pakistani border regions. Concerned that the conflict would spin out of control, Qatar, Türkiye and Saudi Arabia, among others, urged both sides to exercise restraint. On 15 October, the two sides agreed to a 48-hour ceasefire, which was meant to be followed by talks in the Qatari capital Doha.<sup>60</sup>

## 2. Deadlocked talks

The negotiations later that month yielded only modest progress. Mediated jointly by Qatar and Türkiye, the first round that took place in Doha on 18-19 October saw Islamabad and Kabul, represented by their defence ministers, agree to make the ceasefire permanent and commit to refrain from taking hostile action against each

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<sup>56</sup> "Kabul condemns violation of its 'sovereign territory'", *Dawn*, 10 October 2025.

<sup>57</sup> Pakistan's 9 October strike reportedly hit Mehsud's armoured car in the heart of Kabul. Mehsud is alive, however. In a video released on 16 October, he claimed to have been in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province at the time of the strike. "Militant leader at heart of Afghan-Pakistan conflict survived strike that provoked clashes", Reuters, 16 October 2025.

<sup>58</sup> "Fierce clashes along Afghan border take heavy toll", *Dawn*, 13 October 2025; "Counter-terrorism measures legitimate self-defence: FO", *Dawn*, 11 October 2025; "Pakistan warns Taliban truce won't hold if attacks persist", *The Express Tribune*, 4 November 2025.

<sup>59</sup> "PM blames Kabul-Delhi nexus for surge in terrorist attacks", *Dawn*, 13 November 2025. "Kabul is fighting a proxy war for India", the defence minister said, while the military spokesman said, "the Taliban government continues to sponsor terrorist outfits in cahoots with India". "23 troops martyred, 200 Taliban and affiliated terrorists killed in border skirmishes with Afghanistan, ISPR", *Dawn*, 12 October 2025; "Ceasefire might not hold as Afghan Taliban have become proxy for India: Asif", *Dawn*, 15 October 2025.

<sup>60</sup> Pakistan's foreign ministry said the ceasefire agreement was reached through the "bilateral track". Weekly media briefing, Pakistani Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 17 October 2025.

other. Yet neither appeared willing to concede to the demands or respond to the concerns of the other side. While Islamabad urged Kabul to take action against TTP militants in Afghanistan, the Taliban denied any TTP presence in Afghan territory, instead alleging that Islamic State militants based in Pakistan were threatening Afghanistan's security. At the second round, which was held in Istanbul on 25-30 October, again with Turkish-Qatari mediation, Pakistani officials claimed that the Afghan delegation was unwilling to provide concrete, verifiable written commitments of action against the Afghanistan-based TTP and other anti-Pakistan militants. Kabul reiterated its position that the militants were Pakistani citizens, fighting on Pakistani territory.<sup>61</sup>

Despite their disagreements, the two sides agreed to continue the ceasefire.

But then negotiations stalled. Upon the second round's conclusion, Türkiye and Qatar released a joint statement saying Islamabad and Kabul had agreed to put in place a "monitoring and verification mechanism that will ensure maintenance of peace and impose a penalty on the violating party".<sup>62</sup> The next steps for that agreement were to be discussed in a third round on 6 November in Istanbul, where both sides were represented by their intelligence chiefs. That meeting, however, ended in deadlock. Blaming Kabul for the stalemate, the Pakistani defence minister said Islamabad had insisted on formal written commitments from Kabul to stop TTP attacks, but the Taliban were willing to provide only verbal assurances.<sup>63</sup> The Taliban foreign minister, for his part, accused Islamabad of "unrealistic demands", including asking the Taliban to summon all TTP militants back to Afghanistan.<sup>64</sup>

The ceasefire between the neighbours still holds, but it is fragile and could easily unravel should a new TTP attack claim large numbers of Pakistani military casualties. Two militant attacks have already come close to setting off all-out hostilities: the 10 November suicide-cum-gun attack on the Wana cadet college in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's North Waziristan district and the 11 November suicide bombing outside a court in Islamabad that killed twelve people – the first such attack in the federal capital in years.

Top Pakistani officials claimed that both attacks were orchestrated across the border, alleging that the suicide bombers were Afghan citizens. They said the assailants and their local TTP facilitators had remained in constant touch with the Afghanistan-based TTP high command while the attacks were under way.<sup>65</sup> Soon after these incidents, Pakistan's defence minister said: "In this environment, it would be futile to hold

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<sup>61</sup> The Pakistani military spokesman later said the Pakistani delegation had told its Afghan counterpart at the second round of talks that Kabul "must either take action against these militants or hand them over to us so that we can bring them to justice". "Pakistan warns Taliban truce won't hold if attacks persist", *The Express Tribune*, 4 November 2025.

<sup>62</sup> A cabinet minister said Kabul would be bound to take action against Pakistani militants operating from Afghan territory after reaching an agreement with Islamabad to form a joint monitoring and verification mechanism with third-party participation. "No room for Taliban regime's excuses after joint monitoring mechanism", *The News*, 2 November 2025; "Istanbul dialogue: Pakistan, Afghanistan agree to continue ceasefire", *Dawn*, 31 October 2025.

<sup>63</sup> "Pakistan-Afghanistan talks end, 'no plans for more rounds': defense minister", *The News*, 7 November 2025.

<sup>64</sup> X post by *TOLO News*, @TOLONews, 8:07pm, 9 November 2025.

<sup>65</sup> "All terrorists involved in attack on cadet college in Wana killed, security sources say", *Dawn*, 12 November 2025; "Capital suicide bomber: Network of facilitators, handlers identified", *The News*, 15 November 2025.

greater hope for successful negotiations with the rulers of Kabul”. He also warned that Pakistan could once again opt for cross-border strikes if a major attack was linked to Afghanistan.<sup>66</sup>

On 25 November, one day after another deadly militant attack on a Frontier Constabulary headquarters in Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa’s capital, the Afghan Taliban claimed that Pakistani forces had bombed Khost province and carried out air-strikes in Kunar and Paktika provinces. They vowed retribution. Denying it had struck Afghan territory, the Pakistan military claimed that the Peshawar attackers were Afghan nationals.<sup>67</sup>

Tensions heightened again the following February, after two deadly TTP attacks in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, a 16 February suicide bombing in Bajaur that killed eleven soldiers and a 21 February suicide attack in Bannu that killed a senior officer and soldier.<sup>68</sup> Pakistani authorities claimed that the Bajaur attacker was an Afghan national who had served in the Afghan Taliban forces.<sup>69</sup> The interior minister had earlier alleged that the detained “main mastermind” of a 6 February suicide attack by the Islamic State’s local franchise on a Shia mosque in Islamabad, which killed around 38 worshipers, was also an Afghan national.<sup>70</sup>

Late on 21 February, Pakistani fighter jets struck three Afghan border provinces. Refuting Afghan Taliban claims that dozens of civilians were killed in the strikes, Islamabad insisted that its warplanes had targeted only TTP and IS-KP “camps and hideouts”.<sup>71</sup> While Kabul has vowed to retaliate, Islamabad has that warned it will strike again if cross-border attacks from Afghan soil continue unabated.<sup>72</sup> With bilateral relations at an all-time low, the potential for a repeat of the October clashes remains dangerously high.

<sup>66</sup> “Cannot rule out strikes inside Afghanistan after terror incidents”, *The News*, 11 November 2025; “State of war’: Defence Minister Asif says futile to hope for positive talks with Kabul after Islamabad attack”, *Dawn*, 11 November 2025.

<sup>67</sup> “Pakistan carried out strikes on Afghanistan, claims Taliban spokesman”, *Dawn*, 25 November 2025; “DG ISPR refutes allegations by Afghan Taliban of Pakistani airstrikes in Afghanistan: State media”, *Dawn*, 25 November 2025.

<sup>68</sup> “11 security personnel martyred, 12 terrorists killed in Bajaur: ISPR”, *The News*, 2026; “Lieutenant colonel among two army personnel martyred in Bannu suicide attack”, *Dawn*, 21 February 2026.

<sup>69</sup> “Bajaur attack traced to Afghanistan”, *The Express Tribune*, 21 February 2026.

<sup>70</sup> Training for the attack, the minister said, was carried out by “Da’esh Afghanistan” in Afghan territory. “Mastermind of attack on Islamabad imambargah among 4 arrested in KP raids, say Mohsin Naqvi”, *Dawn*, 7 February 2026.

<sup>71</sup> In a 22 February statement, the information ministry said Islamabad had “conclusive evidence” that the TTP and IS-KP had perpetrated the Islamabad, Bajaur and Bannu attacks at the “behest of their Afghanistan-based leadership and handlers”. “Armed forces strike 7 terrorist camps along Pakistan-Afghanistan border in response to recent suicide bombings”, *Dawn*, 22 February 2026. See also “Afghanistan’s ruling Taliban says Pakistan strikes kill, injure dozens”, Reuters, 22 February 2026.

<sup>72</sup> Briefing parliament on 23 February, a cabinet minister, claiming that all three attacks were “linked” to Afghanistan-based actors, warned that Islamabad “cannot tolerate this anymore”. “Pakistan cannot ‘tolerate this anymore’, says minister as he outlines terrorist attacks preceding Afghanistan strikes”, *Dawn*, 24 February 2026. See also “Afghanistan promises ‘appropriate response’ after deadly Pakistan strikes”, Al Jazeera, 22 February 2026.

## IV. Pressure Tactics and Punitive Actions

Before the escalation in October 2025, Islamabad had resorted to economic levers in a bid to press Kabul to crack down on the TTP. It also forcibly repatriated hundreds of thousands of Afghan nationals living in Pakistan as a means of punishing the Afghan authorities. In the wake of the October clashes, Islamabad has stepped up such pressure tactics and punitive actions.

### A. Targeting the Afghan Economy

Immediately after the Taliban takeover, Islamabad had fostered economic ties with the new rulers, including through concessions on bilateral and transit trade. But as tensions with Kabul over militancy heightened, Islamabad began using economic levers to try putting pressure on the Afghan Taliban authorities. Measures included higher taxes on Afghan imports, restrictions on the movement of Afghan cross-border transport and sporadic closures of the main border crossings at Torkham in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Chaman in Balochistan. Since October 2025, Pakistan has entirely shut down these routes and barred all interstate commerce.<sup>73</sup> “They have the TTP, we have trade – is how the officials look at it”, said a Pakistani trader in close contact with security officials.<sup>74</sup> In November, the Afghan Taliban authorities said trade with Pakistan would remain suspended unless Islamabad provided guarantees that it would not make commercial ties contingent on political relations again.

As this trade accounts for just 0.6 per cent of Pakistani exports, it has not hurt the national economy too badly.<sup>75</sup> But the impact in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has been more severe: businessmen, traders, transporters and workers have urged the government to reopen the border crossings, warning that the livelihoods of many locals are dependent on cross-border trade. “Our financial losses are much bigger than point scoring on the diplomatic front over security issues”, lamented a prominent local industrialist.<sup>76</sup>

Still, while acknowledging the economic pain caused by the closure, the Pakistani foreign ministry insists that the resumption of trade depends on Kabul ending “the support it extended to anti-Pakistan militants”.<sup>77</sup> The defence minister also claims that reducing cross-border traffic with Afghanistan is beneficial for Pakistan’s security, as it limits opportunities for militant infiltration and eases border management.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> In December, Islamabad partially reopened the Torkham and Chaman border crossings to UN aid convoys headed into Afghanistan.

<sup>74</sup> Crisis Group interview, Sarhad Chamber of Commerce and Industry trader, Peshawar, October 2024.

<sup>75</sup> With Pakistan accounting for an estimated 10 per cent of its exports, Afghanistan’s losses are much higher. Mubarak Ali Khan, “Afghanistan bears heavier economic cost as Pakistan’s trade suspension bites”, *Dawn*, 31 December 2025; “Temporary freezing of border trade”, *Dawn*, 17 November 2025.

<sup>76</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, journalist, Khyber district, November 2025. See also “Afghan regime’s move to suspend trade sends shocks through KP”, *Dawn*, 13 November 2025; and “Reopen Afghan border, demand traders as goods rot at checkpoints”, *The Express Tribune*, 13 November 2025.

<sup>77</sup> The foreign ministry spokesperson also warned that the future of major infrastructure projects, such the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline and the Central Asia-South Asia Electricity Transmission and Trade Project, depends on a shift in the Afghan Taliban’s policies. “Trade, power plans linked to Kabul ending terror support”, *Dawn*, 22 November 2025.

<sup>78</sup> “Afghanistan’s trade shift could aid Pakistan’s security, says Khawaja Asif”, *The News*, 13 November 2025.

## B. The Deportation Drive

Mass deportations of Afghans have been another means of applying pressure on Kabul. Millions of Afghans took refuge in Pakistan during the anti-Soviet jihad in the 1980s and the Afghan civil war that followed in the 1990s. Millions more sought safety across the border during the U.S.-led intervention in Afghanistan, and a further 600,000 joined the exodus after the 2021 Afghan Taliban takeover.<sup>79</sup> For decades, Pakistani governments accommodated these people, with the help of UN and other humanitarian agencies. Having lost patience with Kabul, however, Islamabad has now cracked down on Afghan refugees and migrants, insisting that they will now need a Pakistani visa to enter or remain in the country.

The government rolled out its new approach in phases. In September 2023, as militancy surged in provinces bordering Afghanistan, Pakistan announced a plan to repatriate “illegal foreigners”, who were told to leave voluntarily or face deportation.<sup>80</sup>

When the plan was launched a month later, the first group to be targeted was the estimated 1.7 million Afghans residing in Pakistan without documentation.<sup>81</sup> But Islamabad soon trained its sights on other Afghans who had documents and the legal protections they are supposed to afford. In the second phase, which began in early March 2025, Islamabad cancelled the cards of an estimated 800,000 Afghan Citizen Card holders, giving them until April to depart the country or be deported.<sup>82</sup> In the third phase, an approximate 1.3 million prime facie refugees were given until 1 September to leave after the government declined to extend the validity of their UN-issued Proof of Residence (PoR) cards.

The crackdown has intensified since the October 2025 clashes, with thousands being detained and deported via the Torkham and Chaman crossings. Scores of refugees awaiting resettlement in Western countries have also been reportedly picked up and forcibly returned to Afghanistan. Overall, close to two million Afghans have either been deported or fled in fear of being detained since October 2023, half of them in 2025 alone. Approximately two million more remain in Pakistan, roughly half of whom are PoR card holders.<sup>83</sup>

The most vulnerable – women, minorities and political or social dissidents – fear persecution, human rights violations and discrimination if they return to Afghanistan.<sup>84</sup>

To stay in Pakistan legally requires them to go to Afghanistan to apply for a visa, a risk that those who escaped Taliban rule can hardly afford to take. Even if they did

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<sup>79</sup> Crisis Group Commentary, “[Pakistan-Afghanistan: Tempering the Deportation Drive](#)”, op. cit.

<sup>80</sup> “Pakistan’s Evolving Militant Landscape: State Responses and Policy Options”, Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies, 26 June 2024.

<sup>81</sup> “Emergency Update #9: Pakistan-Afghanistan Returns Response”, UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 10 January 2024.

<sup>82</sup> The cards, provided by the Pakistan government and facilitated by the UN’s International Organisation of Migration granted temporary residence but not formal refugee status. Crisis Group Commentary, “[Pakistan-Afghanistan: Tempering the Deportation Drive](#)”, op. cit.

<sup>83</sup> “One million Afghans returned from Pakistan in 2025”, press release, UNHCR, 27 November 2025; “Two million Afghans still living in Pakistan: UNHCR”, *Dawn*, 26 December 2025.

<sup>84</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Afghan women refugees, Islamabad, November 2024; Crisis Group telephone interviews, Pakistani women rights defenders, November 2025.

make the trip, acquiring a Pakistani visa is no longer an easy proposition. Women and girls who are still in Pakistan, including those awaiting resettlement in Western countries, now live in fear of police crackdowns or an uncertain future of living without rights or opportunities at home.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, Pakistani women rights activists, November 2025. See also “From Return to Rebuild for Afghan Returnees and Host Communities”, UN Development Programme, 12 November 2025.

## V. A House Divided

The rationale behind such punitive measures is that – besides the jihadists themselves – the Afghan Taliban are primarily responsible for the high tide of violence in Pakistan’s western borderlands. Pakistani officials are right that Kabul should be doing more to curb the TTP’s cross-border incursions. But that is not the whole picture. Pakistan’s own response to the resurgent militancy lacks coherence, due to sharp differences between the federal and provincial authorities about how to deal with the TTP. These differences undermine the capacity of the military and provincial police to cooperate in counter-insurgency operations.

An additional and related problem is that Islamabad seems out of touch with debates about the TTP in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa itself. If it wants to keep the population on side in its counter-insurgency struggle, the federal government should take heed of criticism coming from clergy, politicians and civil society activists in the province, all of whom reject jihadism but also resent the military’s heavy-handed tactics. Women’s perspectives on these issues tend to be missing from the public domain, too – yet it is crucial to listen to them.

### A. The Civil-Military Disconnect

The military takes the lead in the counter-insurgency campaign in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa; the police force, which falls under the provincial government, is often relegated to a secondary role. As the military has overall control of internal security policy, army commanders will often undertake actions without even informing the local police. Their counter-insurgency operations, which the military calls “intelligence-based”, tend to involve ground forces, backed by heavy artillery, mortar fire and helicopter gunships, targeting TTP militants and their hideouts, occasionally using armed drones. Local curfews are often imposed during these operations and house-to-house raids can occur in locations where militants use civilians as human shields.<sup>86</sup>

One reason for the disconnect with the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa police is that the force lacks adequate personnel, training and equipment.<sup>87</sup> The poorly armed police are ill equipped to confront militants bearing the sophisticated weapons the NATO forces in Afghanistan left behind.<sup>88</sup> They are particularly ineffective in the newly merged districts, bordering Afghanistan, that are most vulnerable to militant attack.<sup>89</sup> Prior to

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<sup>86</sup> “Pakistan Security Report 2025”, Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies, Islamabad, 2 January 2026. See also “Curfew imposed as forces launch ‘Operation Sarbakaf’ in Bajaur”, *Dawn*, 30 July 2025; and “Mortar kills 2 children and their mother in northwest Pakistan where troops are targeting militants”, Associated Press, 13 August 2025.

<sup>87</sup> In October 2025, the military spokesperson noted that the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa police had only 3,200 officers, too few to counter militant threats. “KP govt must protect its people instead of begging Afghanistan for security: DG ISPR”, op. cit. The entire force consists of 70,000 men and women. It is tasked with policing a population of 26 million. See data at the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa [government website](#).

<sup>88</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Islamabad-based analyst, October 2025. See also Ismail Khan, “‘One eye on the barrel, the other on the sky’: How police in Bannu are dealing with evolving militant threats”, *Dawn*, 26 November 2025.

<sup>89</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, senior ex-police officer, February 2025; expert on Khyber Pakhtunkhwa policing, October 2025.

the 2018 merger with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the former FATA had their own police, known as Khassadars and Levies, organised along tribal lines. These units were folded into the regular provincial police in April 2019, but senior police officers say they are not yet a professional force.<sup>90</sup>

Well-informed journalists also attribute the military's decision to conduct counter-insurgency operations, often without even informing the local police, to concerns about militant infiltration.<sup>91</sup> In some cases, the military might have good reason for such suspicions. In November 2014, for instance, the provincial police chief admitted that a ringleader of the 2023 Peshawar mosque attack, which killed 88 people, many of them police, was "our own policeman".<sup>92</sup>

But with militant attacks claiming the lives of hundreds of officers and constables, anger is growing within police ranks at the military's grip on counter-insurgency activities. Police say they should be in charge, partly because they recruit their officers from the districts where militants are most active and thus know the terrain better than the military.<sup>93</sup> Ties between the two forces are strained, following police calls for more resources and criticism of the far better equipped military's failure to counter the militant surge.<sup>94</sup> Political tensions also undermine counter-terrorism collaboration between the military and the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa police. The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government that oversees the police is led by Imran Khan's PTI, which refuses to accept the federal coalition government's legitimacy.<sup>95</sup> The provincial authorities are not on the same page with Islamabad, neither with respect to the military's counter-terrorism strategy nor with regard to broader policy toward the TTP presence in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan.

## B. Understanding Militancy: The National Debate

The two largest parties in Pakistan's ruling coalition, the PML-N (Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz) and the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), are largely in agreement on the causes driving militancy, including the role of Afghanistan. The PML-N backs robust military-led counter-insurgency operations. It holds the Afghan Taliban responsible for the Pakistani Taliban resurgence because they have given the militants haven. It also links the rise of militancy to the former PTI government's 2022 failed peace deal with the TTP – in particular, its provision for releasing scores of TTP militants from Pakistani prisons and letting hundreds more armed fighters return from Afghanistan.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Crisis Group interviews, police officers and security expert on the former FATA, Peshawar and Islamabad, October 2024.

<sup>91</sup> A journalist in Peshawar said around 100 police constables were dismissed in 2023-2024 for links to Islamist militancy or drug trafficking. Crisis Group interview, Peshawar, October 2024.

<sup>92</sup> "Arrested facilitator of 2023 Peshawar Police Lines blast was 'our own policeman': KP IG", *Dawn*, 12 November 2024.

<sup>93</sup> Crisis Group interviews, police officers, Peshawar and Islamabad, October 2024.

<sup>94</sup> In September 2024, this anger manifested itself in police protests and sit-ins across the province.

<sup>95</sup> See Crisis Group Asia Briefing N°178, [Pakistan: Inching toward Contested Elections](#), 6 February 2024.

<sup>96</sup> "Most of those orchestrating attacks on Pakistan are those released under the agreement", the interior minister told parliament in late 2024. "Most terrorists released under deal, operating from Afghanistan: Naqvi", *The Express Tribune*, 3 September 2024.

The PPP also backs the counter-insurgency effort. It strongly opposes the TTP's demands to reverse the former FATA's merger with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and to impose sharia in that region. A senior PPP leader who objected to the 2022 peace deal at the time argued that this "unwise" decision, aimed at "appeasing" the Afghan Taliban, had only ended up emboldening the militants.<sup>97</sup> The PPP, which is critical of the Afghan Taliban's violations of women's rights, an issue of particular importance to the party, sees little difference between the TTP and its Afghan allies.<sup>98</sup>

In contrast, Khan's PTI, the largest opposition party at the national level, and which also heads the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provincial government, rejects the coalition government's policy toward Afghanistan. In particular, it emphasises that Islamabad's failure to engage with the Afghan Taliban has undermined the prospects of a negotiated peace with the TTP.<sup>99</sup> On several occasions, including at a multi-party conference in November 2025, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government has called on Islamabad to resume dialogue with Kabul, even offering to hold peace talks with the Afghan Taliban itself. But the federal government has shot down such suggestions, pointing out that no provincial administration is authorised to negotiate with foreign powers.<sup>100</sup>

The PTI also criticises military-led counter-insurgency operations, questioning their efficacy and arguing that they have undermined local rights without restoring the peace. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa chief minister Sohail Afridi, under whose remit the province's police and its counter-terrorism departments fall, staunchly opposes the military's role, insisting on civilian control of counter-insurgency plans. "Despite 14,000 intelligence-based operations, why has there been no decrease in terrorism?", he has queried.<sup>101</sup>

## C. Views in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province

The key interests shaping Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's debate on militant resurgence and links with Afghanistan fall into three main categories. The first is Deobandis represented by Pakistan's largest Islamist party and its extensive madrasa network; the second is Pashtun nationalist parties focusing on the concerns of both local and cross-border Pashtun communities; and the third is groups such as the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement, which give voice to the sentiments of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa civil society.

### 1. Deobandi debates

The JUI-F (Jamiat-e-Ulema Islam-Fazlur Rehman), Pakistan's largest Islamist party,

<sup>97</sup> Crisis Group interview, Islamabad, December 2024.

<sup>98</sup> Crisis Group interviews, PPP leaders, Islamabad, December 2024.

<sup>99</sup> "Imran Khan endorses Gandapur's calls for KP-Kabul talks to curb terrorism", *The News*, 13 September 2024; "KP urges centre to consult with it before launching military anti-terror offensive", *Dawn*, 31 August 2024.

<sup>100</sup> "Negotiations with Afghanistan not domain of the provincial govt: Amir Muqam", *Dawn*, 2 February 2025; "Aman jirga seeks KP govt's input in Pak-Afghan foreign policy", *The News*, 13 November 2025; "Imran 'directs' Gandapur to visit Kabul for peace talks", *Dawn*, 10 September 2025.

<sup>101</sup> "PTI's Sohail Afridi elected KP chief minister in session marred by opposition protests", *Dawn*, 12 October 2025. According to an expert, Afridi's stance, which goes beyond echoing his leader Khan's preferences, is shaped by tensions between the military and people in his home district, Khyber. Crisis Group interview, Islamabad, November 2025.

which is aligned with the PTI-led opposition at the national level, heads an extensive network of Deobandi madrasas in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.<sup>102</sup> The party, whose leaders and workers have suffered regular attacks by IS-KP, the Islamic State's local franchise, condemns jihadist groups.<sup>103</sup> But the JUI-F also opposes the merger of the former FATA with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa as well as the military taking the counter-insurgency lead in the province. Moreover, it advocates for active engagement with the Afghan Taliban, who are fellow Deobandis and Pashtuns.

Islamabad's tensions with Kabul have put a spotlight on Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Deobandi madrasa network, the ideological wellspring of both the Pakistani and Afghan Taliban movements. Deobandi Pashtun leaders and clergy, who played a central role in mentoring Afghan Taliban leaders, considered the Taliban's fight to expel Western forces and the Western-backed government from Afghanistan a legitimate "jihad"; now they argue that, since peace has returned to Afghanistan, Pakistan and the rest of the world should recognise the Taliban as Kabul's new rulers.<sup>104</sup> The Deobandi clergy also believe that only a resumption of dialogue can repair relations between Islamabad and Kabul.<sup>105</sup> But there is little support in Deobandi circles for the TTP's fight with the Pakistani state, given that the country already has an Islamic constitution.<sup>106</sup>

## 2. Pashtun nationalist parties

Pashtun nationalist parties, which draw their support from the province's predominantly Pashtun population, oppose militancy but are also critical of military-led operations. Prominent Pashtun nationalist politicians, many of whom had close ties with Afghanistan's former republican rulers, were aghast at the Afghan Taliban's return to power. The secular nationalist Awami National Party, with a support base in northern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, strongly opposes the TTP, which has killed many of its leaders. But it is equally critical of military operations, due to the high security and economic costs to its constituents.<sup>107</sup>

Though its main base is in Balochistan's northern Pashtun belt, bordering Afghanistan's Kandahar province, the Pakhtunkhwa Milli Awami Party also has a presence in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Since the party's constituents have deep stakes in cross-border trade, it is pushing for engagement with the Afghan Taliban, depicting them as Pashtun brothers. It also opposes the deportation of Afghan refugees, who are mostly fellow Pashtuns, demanding that those born in Pakistan be granted citizenship.<sup>108</sup>

A prominent Pashtun nationalist party in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's conflict-hit southe-

<sup>102</sup> In 1980, the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam broke into two factions, the JUI-F and the Jamiat Ulema-Islam Sami-ul-Haq. The latter has a Deobandi madrasa network of its own in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

<sup>103</sup> Mohammad Amir Rana, "IS-K in Balochistan", *Dawn*, 1 June 2025.

<sup>104</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Deobandi leaders and scholars, Islamabad and Peshawar, October 2024-December 2025.

<sup>105</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa-based expert on Deobandi and other Pakistani Islamic groups, November 2025.

<sup>106</sup> "Geo News: Why is Fazlur Rehman a supporter of democracy in Pakistan but an emirate in Afghanistan?", video, YouTube, 12 September 2021 [Urdu].

<sup>107</sup> "ANP jirga seeks 'concrete steps for peace in KP'", *Dawn*, 27 July 2025.

<sup>108</sup> "PkMAP chief slams govt as 'illegitimate', urges protests", *Dawn*, 11 June 2025.

rn districts is the secular National Democratic Movement, which opposes the Deobandi TTP and Afghan Taliban on ideological grounds. Party leaders are equally critical of the military, however, seeking to hold it accountable both for backing the Pakistani Taliban earlier, referring to earlier peace deals with TTP factions, and for excesses against civilian during its counter-insurgency campaign.<sup>109</sup>

### 3. Civil society

Ten years ago, when the Pakistani Taliban were making inroads in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, many locals lent them support, responding to local militant leaders' Islamist rhetoric and angered by the military's overreach in counter-insurgency operations that often led to mass displacement and rights abuses.<sup>110</sup> But amid rising insecurity and mounting civilian fatalities, much of that good-will has eroded. Beyond the casualties, locals resent the group's kidnappings for ransom – a major source of its funds – and its practice of what it calls Islamic justice, replete with harsh punishments such as public floggings.<sup>111</sup>

While there is local resistance to the Pakistani Taliban's return, there is also little support for military-led counter-insurgency strikes, not least because they are often conducted without taking the concerns of residents into account.<sup>112</sup> Community leaders have organised peace rallies in some of the hardest-hit conflict zones, including Bannu, Bajaur, Khyber and North Waziristan districts. Such assemblies typically call for expulsion of the militants, but also for tempering military operations to protect the lives and livelihoods of locals.

The Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM), a prominent local civil society formation, has widespread support among Pashtun youth because of its opposition to militancy. Its criticism of military operations also resounds locally.<sup>113</sup> The PTM has spearheaded protests, called *uloosi pasoons* (Pashto for “peoples' uprising”), especially in areas that have borne the brunt of militant violence and military operations in the past. The first such *pasoon* was held in Swat in 2022, after the Khan government's negotiations with the TTP leadership brought militants back to the valley.<sup>114</sup> At rallies such as the PTM-hosted Pashtun National Gathering in October 2024, delegates vowed to counter militancy but also decried the economic and human costs of counter-insurg-

<sup>109</sup> Crisis Group interviews, National Democratic Movement leaders, Peshawar and Islamabad, January and November 2025. See also Crisis Group Report, *Pakistan's Tribal Areas: Appeasing the Militants*, op. cit.

<sup>110</sup> For details of the adverse social impact of counter-insurgency operations, particularly on women, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, see Crisis Group Reports *Women and Peacebuilding in Pakistan's North West* and *Women, Violence and Conflict in Pakistan*, both op. cit.; as well as Crisis Group Asia Briefings N°111, *Pakistan: The Worsening IDP Crisis*, 16 September 2010; and N°93, *Pakistan's IDP Crisis: Challenges and Opportunities*, 3 June 2009.

<sup>111</sup> The Pakistani Taliban have also beheaded locals on charges of spying for state forces. Muhammad Ali Siddiqui, “TTP's mentors”, *Dawn*, 29 December 2022; “Militants establish parallel courts in pockets of Tirah valley”, *Dawn*, 21 October 2024.

<sup>112</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, September 2024–January 2025; Crisis Group telephone interview, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa-based journalist, November 2025. See also Muhammad Amir Rana, “Errors in counterterrorism”, *Dawn*, 2 August 2025.

<sup>113</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, PTM supporters, February 2025.

<sup>114</sup> “Swat residents warn of vigilantism if terror activities not reined in”, *Dawn*, 7 October 2022.

ency operations.<sup>115</sup>

A journalist from Khyber district said locals “do not want to provide the TTP a foothold in the tribal areas”, fearing that the ensuing rise in insecurity could trigger further counter-insurgency offensives.<sup>116</sup> Local leaders have attempted to convince TTP militants to leave their districts, to withdraw from populated areas and to stop using civilians as human shields, though with little success. In Bajaur, for instance, a local peace committee held talks with TTP commanders in mid-August 2025 in hopes that the military would stay away if the militants departed. Instead, TTP commanders reportedly demanded that state forces give them prior notice of their movements and refrain from attacking them.<sup>117</sup> After the talks failed, the military launched a counter-insurgency operation, which, as locals feared, displaced more than 55,000 people.<sup>118</sup> Tribal leaders in Khyber district made similar efforts to negotiate a peace with local TTP commanders in early October, also in vain.<sup>119</sup>

## D. Women’s Missing Voices

Women’s voices are largely absent in the policy debate on resurgent militancy, though their lives and livelihoods are deeply affected. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa districts where the TTP has made a comeback, the insurgents are attempting to enforce restrictions on women and girls’ mobility and access to education and work.<sup>120</sup> They have attacked women NGO workers and bombed girls’ schools. A father in Khyber district said parents in conflict-hit regions were withdrawing their daughters from school for fear that classrooms could be targeted.<sup>121</sup>

Women in the areas worst affected by conflict are caught between a rock and a hard place. In interviews conducted by a fact-finding mission from Pakistan’s independent Human Right Commission, women respondents spoke of recurrent displacement and rights violations by both the militants and the military.<sup>122</sup> Though they do not support militancy, women admitted that they often acquiesce when TTP fighters knock on their doors, demanding food and shelter, because they fear the consequences if they refuse.<sup>123</sup> State forces then accuse them of harbouring the insurgents, often destroying their houses.<sup>124</sup>

In some of these hard-hit areas, the military has ordered civilians to evacuate, for example in Khyber district after it commenced an operation in October 2025. This disp-

<sup>115</sup> Crisis Group interviews, political party attendees of Pashtun Qaumi Jirga, Peshawar, October 2024. See also “Khyber jirga ask army, militants to leave Pashtun land in 60 days”, *The News*, 16 October 2024.

<sup>116</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, November 2025.

<sup>117</sup> “TTP refuses to leave Bajaur, deadlock continues in talks”, *The News*, 8 August 2025.

<sup>118</sup> “55,000 displaced from Bajaur due to military offensive, KP Assembly told”, *Dawn*, 12 August 2025.

<sup>119</sup> “No headway in Khyber jirga-TTP talks”, *Dawn*, 13 October 2025.

<sup>120</sup> Crisis Group interviews, women rights activists, Peshawar, October 2024.

<sup>121</sup> Crisis Group interview, Khyber district, January 2025; interviews, women rights activists, Peshawar, October 2024. See also “Two girls’ schools blown up in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa”, *Dawn*, 23 May 2023.

<sup>122</sup> “Caught in the Crossfire: Civilians, Security and the Crisis of Justice in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa”, Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, 2025.

<sup>123</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Peshawar and Islamabad, October 2024. See also “Fear grips parts of Tirah as armed militants start patrols”, *Dawn*, 20 August 2024.

<sup>124</sup> Crisis Group interviews, police officer, Peshawar, October 2024; rights activists, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa districts, September-December 2024.

lacement is painful for everyone, but it hurts women the most, depriving many of shelter in a socially conservative region where their mobility is already restricted.<sup>125</sup> The widows and children of those killed in the conflict are even more vulnerable, as they often have no means of livelihood. The children and wives of slain militants can also find themselves living with stigma in communities that have suffered at the insurgents' hands.<sup>126</sup>

Pakistani policymakers have made little effort to consult women about decisions that affect their wellbeing, but neither have Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's prominent civil society movements and political parties. There was, for example, a separate convention of women at the aforementioned National Pashtun Gathering convened by the PTM, which all major parties in the province attended. But the demands the women's group put forward, including asking the Afghan Taliban to reopen girl's schools, were excluded from its final statement.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Crisis Group interviews, female college students from the newly merged regions; women rights activists, Peshawar, October 2014.

<sup>126</sup> Crisis Group interviews, southern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa districts, October-December 2024.

<sup>127</sup> Crisis Group interviews, PTM gathering attendees, Peshawar, October 2024; Islamabad, January 2025.

## VI. Safeguarding the Western Borderlands

As militancy surges in Pakistani regions bordering Afghanistan and the risks of another outbreak of armed conflict rise, Islamabad and Kabul should step back from the brink, defusing tensions through dialogue with the backing of friendly countries. Islamabad should also rethink its own responses to the TTP, avoiding civilian harm and ensuring local support as it counters an insurgency that has claimed the lives of thousands of security personnel and civilians.

### A. Counter-insurgency, Local Buy-in and National Politics

As militant violence surges to alarming levels in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the prospects of achieving a negotiated peace between Islamabad and the TTP appear remote at best. Past attempts, such as the one initiated by Imran Khan's government in 2022, made little headway. Though those talks brought about a temporary reduction in attacks, the militants were unwilling to moderate their main demands, let alone lay down their arms. Instead, they continued to call for reversing FATA's merger with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and imposing sharia law in the region – demands that are not only anathema to the Pakistani government and political parties but also enjoy little support among residents of those areas. Unless the TTP shows signs of readiness to compromise, the Pakistani state will continue to have little choice but to use force to quell an insurgency that has claimed thousands of lives, civilians, soldiers and police, in hundreds of attacks.

Force-based operations, however, are far more likely to yield results if they have local buy-in. The military should take the concerns of local people into account when planning and conducting counter-insurgency operations.<sup>128</sup> Such consultations should include women to ensure that their concerns are addressed. Locals, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's worst-affected southern districts, say popular opposition to militancy remains intact. But they add that the military's heavy-handed approach threatens to alienate more and more people, which could work in the militants' favour.<sup>129</sup>

Since lower-ranking police often come from the regions where they are posted, there is also a growing demand for civilian law enforcers to take the counter-insurgency lead, rather than the military.<sup>130</sup> But the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa police are ill equipped to conduct such operations, particularly in the former FATA bordering Afghanistan.<sup>131</sup> The provincial government, under which the police and its counter-terrorism departments fall, should seek federal assistance to build police capacity,

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<sup>128</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, security experts in Islamabad, February 2025; Khyber Pakhtunkhwa-based politicians and journalists, November 2025.

<sup>129</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, November 2025. Tariq Parvez, "Police in terrorists' crosshairs", *Dawn*, 26 July 2025. Parvez, formerly a police inspector general, was also the first national coordinator of the National Counter Terrorism Authority.

<sup>130</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, October 2024-January 2025; and by telephone, October-November 2025.

<sup>131</sup> Crisis Group interviews, provincial police officials, Peshawar, October 2024. See also Parvez, "Police in terrorists' crosshairs", op. cit.

cluding through professional training and the provision of modern equipment and weaponry. Greater coordination between the military and provincial police, and the federal and provincial governments, is also essential, especially in efforts to disrupt insurgent recruitment and funding.

Once better equipped and trained, the provincial police should be wary of resorting primarily to lethal force as its means of countering the militant surge, given the likely drawbacks. The police's counter-terrorism department should instead take care to avoid civilian harm in conducting counter-insurgency actions. Using information obtained by its intelligence and investigation departments, the police should also seek to disrupt militant recruitment and financing.

Tensions between the coalition government in Islamabad and the PTI-led authorities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are no doubt a hindrance to the closer collaboration required to boost police effectiveness. But it is in the interest of both the centre and the provincial government to stop political differences at the national level from undermining security cooperation. For both, working at cross-purposes could cause their support to drain away among constituents, who will hold them responsible for failing to protect lives and livelihoods.

## B. Addressing the Afghan Conundrum

In the wake of the October 2025 clashes and the surge of militant attacks, Pakistan's top decision-makers are unwilling to mend ties with the Afghan Taliban authorities. Islamabad has made normalisation of relations contingent on Kabul addressing Pakistan's concerns regarding the TTP's cross-border incursions. But heightened tensions that raise the risk of conflict could further destabilise Pakistan's western borders.

### 1. Easing pressure

While Pakistani anger is understandable, Islamabad should rethink its policies that have dampened cross-border trade as well as its stance toward Afghan nationals in Pakistan. Its attempts to use economic levers to press the Afghan Taliban into addressing its concerns about militancy have yielded few results. Meanwhile, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's traders, transporters and labourers have been robbed of an essential source of income. The federal government should reopen the border crossings to commerce. Beyond the economic benefits, resuming trade would benefit Pakistan's standing with Pashtuns living on the Afghan side of the frontier, who also rely on such commerce to make a living.

Punitive efforts such as the expulsion of Afghan nationals have also failed to yield any major security dividends, even as they fuel anti-Pakistan sentiment across the border. There is, in any case, little justification for detaining and deporting hundreds of thousands of Afghans into a country mired in acute humanitarian and economic crisis.<sup>132</sup> The government is unlikely to abandon its deportation policy, but it should, at the very least, make exceptions for those most at risk. These include journalists and rights

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<sup>132</sup> Crisis Group Report N°350, *After the Aid Axe: Charting a Course to Self-Reliance in Afghanistan*, 2 October 2025.

defenders who fled when the Taliban came to power and would likely face retribution if they returned, as well as women and girls, who would be deprived of mobility as well as the access they now have to work and education.<sup>133</sup>

Pakistan of course has the right to ask foreigners, including Afghans, to enter the country legally with a visa. But even as it insists on such documentation for newly visiting Afghans, it should expedite provision and/or extension of visas for those already in the country, particularly for women rights activists, journalists and women and girls seeking medical care or educational opportunities. UN agencies, local and international NGOs and civil society organisations, including rights groups in Pakistan, could also play a role in helping meet the educational, health care and economic needs of this most vulnerable segment of the Afghan refugee population. At the same time, Western governments should move quickly to resettle refugees who have been approved for relocation, giving priority to those most in need of protection.

## 2. Giving diplomacy a chance

Top Pakistani leaders warn that cross-border strikes could once again be on the cards should the TTP attacks continue apace. Senior officials, however, caution against an over-reliance on force. To fully address cross-border militancy, a senior ex-diplomat noted, “Pakistan needs a more nuanced policy, which includes both diplomacy and incentives”.<sup>134</sup> But high-level diplomacy remains frozen since the end of October, and few in Islamabad have an appetite for restarting formal talks with Kabul. The resumption of dialogue is certainly desirable, but that is unlikely to happen until the Afghan Taliban are willing to police the border more strictly and curb incursions across the frontier. Until such time as Islamabad is willing to renew high-level talks, it can use back channels – via its embassy and consulates in Afghanistan – to convey its concerns to the Taliban authorities and/or defuse tensions if they escalate, particularly in the event of another bloody militant attack.

For now, Islamabad and Kabul have no common ground on how to deal with the TTP leaders and fighters based in Afghanistan. In February 2025, an ex-Pakistani diplomat suggested it is not so much their presence on Afghan soil that is a problem, but their cross-border incursions. “The Taliban authorities are welcome to house and feed the TTP – and their families – just so long as they do not allow the use of Afghan territory as a base for attacks on Pakistan”, he said.<sup>135</sup> Islamabad is sceptical of the Afghan Taliban’s intentions, however. In high-level talks in which he participated, Pakistan’s defence minister noted, Kabul said it would relocate TTP fighters away from the border so long as Pakistan provided the necessary funding. But nothing came of the offer, since Kabul refused to give firm guarantees that the fighters would not cross into Pakistan.<sup>136</sup> Relocations will be acceptable to Islamabad only if Afghan forces police the frontier better to help prevent cross-border attacks. Once back at the negotiating table, the two sides should work to boost cooperation on border management, for example through coordination and intelligence sharing between border

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<sup>133</sup>“From Return to Rebuild for Afghan Returnees and Host Communities”, op. cit.

<sup>134</sup> Crisis Group interview, Islamabad, June 2024.

<sup>135</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Islamabad, February 2025.

<sup>136</sup>“Asif says talks between Pakistan and Afghanistan ‘over’, ceasefire stands for time being”, Dawn, 8 November 2025.

forces.

Amid the bilateral tensions, the role of countries that have friendly ties with both Pakistan and Afghanistan has become crucial to averting renewed armed conflict. Qatari-Turkish mediation might have ended in stalemated talks, but it still produced a ceasefire that, aside from sporadic clashes, remains in place. During the talks, the two sides also agreed to refrain from hostile acts against each other, though they failed to reach consensus on a mechanism to fulfil such pledges, leading to the current deadlock. The prospect of striking such a deal remains slim in the absence of dialogue. Since bilateral talks are not on the cards for now, external mediators – Qatar, Türkiye and Saudi Arabia – could help by resuming efforts to end the impasse.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> On 30 November 2025, Pakistani and Afghan delegations held talks, mediated by Saudi Arabia, in Riyadh. Though the talks made little headway, Saudi diplomats intend to convene another round soon. “Islamabad-Kabul impasse persists in Riyadh”, *Dawn*, 2 December 2025.

## VII. Conclusion

After growing exponentially over the last few years, jihadist violence in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa shows few signs of abating despite intensified military-led counter-insurgency operations that have killed hundreds of militants. Anti-militant sentiment is rife in the region, creating opportunities for state forces to gain local support. But counter-insurgency efforts will prove more effective if local concerns about security and economic costs are taken into account. Strengthening Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's provincial police and ensuring that the forces are responsive to local concerns remains a top demand of many political and social leaders in the conflict-hit province, alongside better coordination between federal and provincial authorities and law enforcement agencies. That would, however, require the federal authorities and the province's PTI-led government to set aside their political differences for the greater good.

Islamabad will also have to revisit its policy toward Kabul if it wishes to counter the cross-border threats posed by Pakistani militants. Deportations of Afghan nationals are not just endangering the most vulnerable, particularly women and girls. They are also deepening anti-Pakistan feeling in Afghanistan. Similarly, economic pressures have failed to nudge the Afghan Taliban to crack down on the Pakistani Taliban, while imposing substantial economic costs on Pashtuns living on both sides of the border.

Even as it clearly conveys zero tolerance for Afghan territory being used to mount attacks in Pakistan, Islamabad should bear in mind that resorting to cross-border strikes will increase the risk of armed conflict. Instead, Islamabad – and Kabul – can use venues that friendly countries offer to make their case to each other and to the rest of the world. Finding peaceful ways to settle the differences between Islamabad and Kabul would better serve Pakistani and Afghan interests than attempting to resolve them on the battlefield.

**Islamabad/Brussels, 27 February 2026**

## VIII. Appendix A: Map of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa



**IX. Appendix B: Map of Pakistan**



Based on UN Map No. 4181 Rev. 1 (January 2004), "North-West Frontier" has been changed to "Khyber Pakhtunkhwa".

Department of Peacekeeping Operations  
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