

Escalatory Airpower, Hybrid Retaliation, and Regional Security: Reassessing the Pakistan–Afghanistan Confrontation and Its Implications for India

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Abstract

Relations between Pakistan and Taliban-led Afghanistan have deteriorated steadily since 2022, shifting from uneasy coexistence to recurring cross-border confrontation. Pakistan's increasing reliance on airpower, combined with Afghanistan's retaliatory use of asymmetric tactics and inherited military equipment, has produced a conflict that sits awkwardly between counterterrorism and interstate warfare. Diplomatic engagement has continued, but it has produced little tangible progress. At the same time, competing narratives about militancy and responsibility have deepened mistrust on both sides. This article explores the strategic logic behind these developments and considers what they may mean for India's regional security outlook.

Introduction

The Taliban's return to power in Kabul in Aug 2021 was initially interpreted in Islamabad as a potentially positive development. A sympathetic government across the border, many believed, might ease long-standing security concerns along Pakistan's western frontier and encourage closer alignment on counter-militancy issues. The reality that followed proved far more complicated.

In the months after the Taliban takeover, militant violence inside Pakistan began to rise, particularly attacks attributed to Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).¹ Various security assessments point to a noticeable increase in both the scale and frequency of these incidents in the post-withdrawal period. Pakistani officials increasingly argued that militant sanctuaries across the Afghan border were enabling this trend.² Kabul, however, rejected the accusation and maintained that Pakistan's security challenges stemmed primarily from domestic governance and policy choices.

What began as a dispute over attribution gradually moved beyond rhetoric. Airstrikes, retaliatory engagements, and sustained military alertness along the Durand Line replaced earlier diplomatic exchanges. The relationship now occupies an ambiguous

space somewhere between cross-border counter-insurgency spill over and limited interstate confrontation.

Pakistan's Turn to Airpower

Pakistan's growing reliance on airstrikes inside Afghan territory appears less accidental than deliberate. From Islamabad's perspective, airpower offers something that ground operations cannot: speed, visibility, and a degree of distance from the political risks of a prolonged deployment. Officials describe these strikes as targeted counter-terrorism actions against TTP and Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K). Still, the scale and frequency of some operations have led observers to suggest that the situation has moved uncomfortably close to an open confrontation.³

In strategic terms, the approach resembles coercive diplomacy—the idea that limited, carefully calibrated force might persuade an adversary to alter behaviour without crossing the threshold into a full-scale war.⁴ Airpower becomes more than a battlefield tool; it also functions as political messaging. It signals resolve to domestic audiences and communicates deterrence to external ones.

Yet, the reliance on airstrikes brings its own complications. Once military force crosses an international border, the distinction between counterterrorism and violation of sovereignty becomes difficult to sustain. The United Nations reporting has repeatedly warned that cross-border operations heighten civilian risks and contribute to regional instability.⁵ Allegations of civilian casualties have reinforced Kabul's sovereignty-based objections and complicated Pakistan's diplomatic position. Airpower can inflict punishment quickly. Whether it can compel political change remains far less clear, and that uncertainty sits at the centre of the current standoff.

Afghan Adaptation and Hybrid Response

Afghanistan cannot match Pakistan in the air. That imbalance is unlikely to change in the near term. Yet, the Taliban government inherited a substantial quantity of military equipment following the United States' withdrawal, including armoured vehicles, artillery, and modern small arms.⁶ Although maintenance and training challenges limit how effectively this materiel can be used, it has nonetheless improved mobility and confidence

on the battlefield.⁷ Rather than attempting conventional confrontation, Afghan responses have largely taken the form of retaliatory raids and limited artillery exchanges along the border. This pattern fits what scholars often describe as ‘Hybrid Warfare’—a blend of irregular tactics and selective conventional capability designed to offset technological disadvantage.⁸ The objective does not appear to be escalation dominance. Instead, the pattern suggests an effort to impose costs and avoid appearing passive in the face of repeated strikes. Over time, a cycle has emerged: airstrike, retaliation, and renewed signalling. Neither side seems willing to escalate dramatically, yet neither appears willing to accept losses without response. That dynamic keeps tensions in a persistent state of friction.

Diplomatic Stagnation, Narrative Contestation, and India’s Position

Efforts at mediation in Doha and Ankara have produced little lasting progress.⁹ The obstacle lies less in procedural failure than in incompatible expectations. Pakistan seeks decisive Taliban action against TTP networks, while Taliban leadership appears reluctant to confront actors with ideological or historical proximity in ways that could threaten internal cohesion.¹⁰ This gap is difficult to bridge. Even when dialogue takes place, the underlying assumptions remain fundamentally at odds. The result is a diplomatic process that continues but rarely advances.

Kabul rejects Pakistan's claim that it is harbouring terrorists and supplying weapons to terrorists. Afghanistan argues that Pakistan is attempting to shift responsibility for domestic instability. The disagreement extends beyond rhetoric; it influences diplomatic positioning and international perception. The Indian Ministry of External Affairs publicly condemned the cross-border airstrikes and reiterated support for Afghan sovereignty.¹¹ The statement aligns with New Delhi’s longstanding emphasis on territorial integrity and opposition to unilateral military action across borders.

Regional Spill Over and the Iran Factor

The confrontation is unfolding within a wider regional environment where cross-border military action is becoming more frequent. Iran’s missile and drone strikes inside Pakistan illustrate the erosion of restraint norms governing territorial sovereignty.¹² Policy analysts

warn that overlapping tensions among Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan could generate a broader arc of instability across West and South Asia.¹³ The risk is less a single large-scale war than the gradual normalisation of limited cross-border military exchanges. Over time, such normalisation increases the probability of miscalculation. Escalation does not always begin dramatically. Sometimes it becomes routine first.

Strategic Implications for India

For India, the situation presents a mixed picture. Pakistan's western security pressures inevitably constrain its strategic bandwidth. Multi-front security demands are widely recognised as limiting escalation flexibility.¹⁴ However, the increasing use of airpower as a cross-border counter-terrorism tool establishes a regional precedent. If normalised, such practices could alter crisis stability calculations in South Asia. India's current posture and measured diplomatic signalling combined with operational constraints suggest an effort to preserve strategic flexibility while avoiding entanglement in a volatile theatre.

Conclusion

The Pakistan–Afghanistan confrontation is no longer an episodic border instability. It reflects deeper divergence in threat perception, political expectation, and strategic orientation. Airpower has become a recurring instrument of coercion. Afghanistan has responded with calibrated hybrid retaliation. Diplomacy remains stalled, not absent but structurally constrained. What makes the situation particularly sensitive is the broader regional climate. Cross-border force is becoming more common, not less. That trend reduces the shock value of escalation and increases the risk of gradual normalisation.

For India, the challenge is not immediate confrontation but sustained uncertainty. Managing that uncertainty, through preparedness, restraint, and calibrated signalling, may prove more consequential than attempting to resolve the instability itself.

Endnotes

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Article uploaded on 16-03-2026

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