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The forgotten frontline

While the world focuses on Iran, the volatile conflict between Afghanistan and Pakistan is intensifying — with repercussions far beyond the border

With martial rhetoric, Pakistan's Defence Minister Khawaja Asif escalated the conflict with Afghanistan a bit more than a week ago: 'Our patience has run out. Now it is open war between us.' Only hours earlier, Pakistan had carried out airstrikes on Kabul, Kandahar and the province of Paktia, while heavy fighting raged along the border and Afghan drones targeted sites inside Pakistan. According to the United Nations, the number of casualties has been steadily rising since then, further worsening an already dire humanitarian situation — particularly on the Afghan side.

Yet the escalation in the Hindu Kush did not remain in the international headlines for long. The very next day, Israel and the United States attacked Iran. Since then, fears have been growing that the regional conflagration in the Middle East could spread further, reaching as far as South Asia. The already complex puzzle of actors and interests across these interconnected regions is becoming even more complicated. In Germany, we must acknowledge with some self-criticism that developments in Afghanistan have received too little attention since the Taliban seized power in the summer of 2021. And too often, Pakistan has also faded into the background in the shadow of Germany's priority partnership with India. Both Afghanistan and Pakistan urgently require a more strategic perspective.

Long-standing history

But first things first: the Afghan–Pakistani conflict has deep historical roots. To this day, no Afghan government has officially recognised the Durand Line – the border established in 1893 between colonial British India and the Emirate of Afghanistan and cemented with the independence of India and Pakistan in 1947 – as the legitimate frontier. In recent years, there have been several prolonged episodes of fighting along this disputed line, which cuts through the settlement area of the

Pashtuns. Since October 2025, a fragile ceasefire brokered by Qatar and Turkey had been in place.

The immediate trigger for the latest escalation was a devastating suicide attack carried out by the Pakistani terrorist organisation Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) on a Shiite mosque in Islamabad at the beginning of February, which killed more than 30 people and injured nearly 200. The TTP in Pakistan is an independent movement and should not be confused with the Afghan Taliban, although they are ideological jihadist brothers in spirit. Their terrorist attacks have increased significantly since the fall of Kabul. They deliberately target the centres of state power, including the Pakistani capital. Pakistan accuses Afghanistan of providing a safe haven to the TTP as well as to the local affiliate of the Islamic State. Pakistani military operations against Afghan targets repeatedly claim civilian casualties, most recently including members of an Afghan cricket team. The border has also been fortified with a massive fence, and crossings for both people and goods have been repeatedly closed. Pakistan has further tightened its refugee policy, 'returning' hundreds of thousands of Afghan refugees — as well as refugees from Iran. This has further aggravated Afghanistan's already dramatic economic and social distress. For the de facto authorities in Kabul and their leadership in Kandahar, this comes at the worst possible time in their efforts to stabilise and rebuild the country.

Militarily, Pakistan is clearly superior to the Afghan fighters, who continue to rely in part on weapons and equipment captured after the withdrawal of international troops. Pakistan also controls Afghan airspace. Yet the Soviet Union, the United States and others have already learned the painful lesson that military superiority alone does not guarantee victory in the Hindu Kush. For Pakistan, this is particularly bitter: it had hoped to benefit at least somewhat from the change of power in Afghanistan, after having tolerated for years that Afghan insurgents and terrorist groups – including those linked to the brutal Haqqani Network – found refuge on Pakistani territory. As it now turns out, this was a miscalculation.

The wider geopolitical chessboard

Geopolitically, China and India, in particular, play prominent roles in the conflict between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Sino-Pakistani 'all-weather partnership' is regularly put to the test by attacks on infrastructure projects linked to the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor. The corridor is intended – through the port of Gwadar – to secure Beijing access to the Arabian Sea, bypassing the strategic bottleneck of the Strait of Malacca. At the same time, Chinese-produced

fighter jets and military technology played an important role in Pakistan's brief but dangerous military clash with India in the Kashmir region in May 2025.

Amid these regional power shifts, India is expanding its relations with the Taliban without formally recognising them. In autumn 2025, Afghan Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi visited New Delhi; the Indian government is also seeking to fully reopen its embassy in Kabul. Whether this lends credence to Pakistan's claim that India is waging war against Pakistan via and together with the Taliban is another matter. What is true, however, is that – especially before the Taliban returned to power in 2021 – India pushed for a strategic transport corridor between India and Afghanistan via the Iranian deep-sea port of Chabahar in order to bypass Pakistan. The war involving Iran now represents another setback for India. Particularly sensitive for Delhi is that the sinking of an Iranian warship by a US submarine off Sri Lanka has already extended the conflict into the Indian Ocean.

Is an even larger regional conflagration threatening to spread into South Asia? After the chaotic withdrawal of Western troops from Afghanistan, many in the region were rightly concerned about the emergence of a security vacuum. Today we know: that vacuum has indeed emerged. In the current situation, the risk of regional Shiite mobilisation is real, as shown by the deadly clashes during an attempted storming of the US consulate in Karachi and similar scenes in Lahore and Islamabad. Tensions are particularly high in the capital, not unlike the 'march on the capital' in solidarity with Gaza staged last year by the Islamist Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan. Pakistan's participation in the Board of Peace initiative led by Donald Trump is also viewed critically by the public, triggering further protests.

The alarming developments in and around Afghanistan and Pakistan should serve as a wake-up call.

In addition, the border region of Balochistan remains a hotspot. There, Iran and Pakistan carried out reciprocal air and missile strikes on militant groups on each other's territory in early 2024. According to local reports, militant Baloch groups from Pakistan have recently crossed the border into Iran. Whether these reports are ultimately confirmed or not, such developments illustrate the risk of further conflict escalation.

It also remains to be seen whether – and if so, in what form – the defence alliance concluded in September 2025 between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia will be activated. Pakistan's Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar referred

to it directly in parliament a few days ago, stating that Islamabad was in contact with Iran in order to prevent further attacks on Saudi Arabia. The alliance could therefore become a rapid practical test for the deal between Islamabad and Riyadh, which has been described as a geopolitical bombshell. At the same time, it is equally possible that the Afghan–Pakistani conflict will for the time being remain limited to the two adversaries and continue along the familiar pattern of escalation. Yet this would by no means be reassuring — above all, it would remain a tragedy for the many innocent civilians on both sides.

In any case, the alarming developments in and around Afghanistan and Pakistan should serve as a wake-up call for us in Germany. At the latest with the conclusion of the work of the parliamentary inquiry committee and the commission of enquiry on Afghanistan during the previous legislative term of the German Bundestag, we have taken our eyes off the country in the Hindu Kush. And we have left the people of Afghanistan alone. The fate of millions of Afghans must not permanently depend on whichever de facto authorities happen to rule there. This does nothing to advance women's and human rights.

At the same time, we have interests of our own – from security and migration to trade, connectivity and resources – that we must once again view more strategically, particularly in South Asia. The same applies to Pakistan, where not only the devastating floods but also the extremely precarious situation of vulnerable former local staff and partners require our attention. Further developing and substantiating the partnership of interests with the world's fifth most populous country is very much in our own interest.



Mirco Günther
Berlin

Mirco Günther is Head of the Asia Department at the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. He was previously FES Country Representative in Afghanistan and head of the FES regional office in Asia. In 2014, he helped establish the OSCE Observer Mission in Eastern Ukraine and also worked for the organisation in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan.



Benedikt Ivanovs
Berlin

Benedikt Ivanovs is responsible for India, Nepal and Pakistan in the Asia and Pacific Department at the Friedrich Ebert Foundation.

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