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## *Clashes between Afghanistan and Pakistan escalate*

Following several weeks of clashes and unrest between Afghanistan and Pakistan along the border, the Taliban\* has reportedly invaded its neighbour and taken control of a town 24km from the border.

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Since December, 2024, clashes between Afghanistan and Pakistan have intensified, drawing attention from international media and observers. This comes against the background of a spike in violent terrorist attacks, most of which took place in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (South Waziristan, north-western Pakistan). In 2023, 645 attacks were recorded. 2024, however, saw an even higher number with 856 incidents. In total, more than 1,000 people, both civilians and law enforcement, lost their lives as a result.

“TTP”\* has given the Taliban\* strategic depth inside Pakistan

### **Afghan-Pakistani relations**

In general, recent Afghan-Pakistani relations have not been perfectly smooth. When Pakistan was established in 1947, the Durand Line (which initially appeared in 1893 during colonial times) was officially established as the border between it and Afghanistan and is internationally recognised as such. Afghanistan, however, has never recognised it, considering it an artificial, colonial-era dividing line that separates Pashtuns trapped on either side (by the way, the Taliban\* has also always shared this point of view, both currently and in the 1990s).

For 20 years, Pakistan backed the Taliban\*, going against the public international consensus. In an interview to the Hindustan Times on January 5, strategic affairs expert Sushant Sareen explained that the large-scale Pakistani support of the Taliban\*, including in

terms of information, manpower, weapons, providing a safe haven for Taliban\* fighters etc., was part of a strategy aimed at ‘indebting’ the Taliban\* to Pakistan, which would then win their favour and provide Pakistan with a stronger position within Afghanistan. Sareen continues to say that it has been a Pakistani dream to reach the Central Asian republics via Afghanistan ever since the fall of the Soviet Union. However, the gruesome effects of decades of war and meddling in the internal affairs of Afghanistan – mainly on the part of the United States – blocked such a possibility.

Pakistan welcomed the Taliban\* coming to power again in 2021, with then-prime minister Imran Khan calling their return to power “Afghans having broken the shackles of slavery”. Then-interior minister Sheikh Rasheed Ahmed also welcomed it, saying that it would create a ‘new bloc’ and would transform the region and boost its importance globally.

In addition to disagreement surrounding the Durand Line, another key issue in bilateral relations is the Taliban’s\* rejection of Pakistani hegemony in the region and the group’s refusal to control or limit activities of the Tehreek-e Taliban Pakistan\* (TTP\*, also known as the Pakistani Taliban\*). The Taliban\* view issues between Pakistani authorities and the TTP\* as their internal issue. The TTP\* has frequently been involved or responsible for the aforementioned attacks of late, which have proven to be some of the deadliest in over 10 years. Moreover, the TTP\* has established links with some Baloch insurgent groups (including the Balochistan Liberation Army), something Pakistan was not able to prevent or effectively handle.

During the premiership of Imran Khan, there were attempts at dialogue with the TTP\*. These attempts, however, bore no fruit and instead allowed for TTP\* to regroup and return to the northwest of the country (to the so-called tribal belt). The Pakistani airstrikes, the latest round of which started last December, were reportedly aimed at TTP\* hideouts in the bordering regions of Afghanistan. The Taliban\* has denied harbouring TTP\* members.

### **Who are the TTP\*?**

According to the UN Security Council, Tehreek-e Taliban Pakistan\* is an “alliance of formerly disparate militant groups” that joined forces in 2007 following Pakistani military operations against al-Qa’eda\* militants in the tribal belt of Pakistan (formally the Federally Administered Tribal Areas). The group is rooted along the Afghan-Pakistani border and estimates suggest that it consists of 30,000-35,000 people.

The stated goals of the TTP\* are ridding the tribal belt and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa of Islamabad’s influence, implementing and enforcing the correct form of shari’a law throughout Pakistan and ridding Afghanistan of (Western) Coalition forces. The group wishes

to see the overthrow of the Pakistani government and the establishment of the Emirate of Pakistan. The TTP\* has long-winded ties with al-Qa'eda\* and was on July 29, 2011, listed by the UN on the ISIL\* (Da'esh\*) and al-Qa'eda\* Sanctions List for its association with al-Qa'eda\*.

In the interview to the Hindustan Times, Sushant Sareen stated that the “TTP\* has given the Taliban\* strategic depth inside Pakistan”.

### **Concerns about regional spill-over**

The country that is perhaps the most concerned about recent escalations between Afghanistan and Pakistan is Tajikistan. The Jamaat Ansarullah\* group (Tajik Taliban\*), which operates from north-eastern Afghanistan, is a major threat to the Tajik government, headed by Emomali Rahmon since 1994. Although Jamaat Ansarullah\* has existed for a number of years, having emerged in the late 1990s following the end of the Tajik Civil War, and always aimed to overthrow Rahmon, it has become an even bigger threat for Tajikistan since the Taliban's\* return to power in 2021, especially considering the fact that the group has served as the border patrol along the Afghan-Tajik border since then.

On the other hand, the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan (consisting mostly of former anti-Taliban\* Northern Alliance men), is based in Tajikistan. Tajikistan has – more than once – turned to the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) for help and coordination in the sphere of anti-terrorism, however more and more Central Asian countries (of which Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are part of CSTO) are starting to view the Taliban\* more favourably. This raises the question of whether Tajikistan will seek closer ties with Pakistan to counter their shared threat.

\* Organisations banned in the Russian Federation

Vanessa Sevidova, January 11, 2025

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