Afghanistan-Pakistan: The Deep Causes of the Conflict

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Introduction: A War with Deeper Roots

From the 22nd of February 2026, when the first round of Pakistani air attacks began, to the 1st of April of the same year, when the peace talks in Urumqi under Chinese mediation started, Pakistan and Afghanistan waged a war centred around their shared border, known as the Durand Line.

However, the war did not end in Urumqi and did not start in February, since in October 2025 the Pakistani air force started to bomb Kabul, with consequential clashes on the frontier that forced Islamabad to close the Torkham and Chaman passes.[1] Then, on 27 April 2026, the Afghan University of Kunar was hit (with 7 deaths according to Afghan authorities)[2] and, following the terrorist attack of 18 September in North-West Pakistan, Islamabad responded by bombing ten Afghan localities, with clashes in Kurram and Paktia,[3] marking a structural continuity of the conflict that needs to be meticulously analysed.

This paper argues that the deep causes of this conflict are both geostrategic and cultural: Pakistan lacks strategic depth and therefore needs a friendly regime in Kabul; in addition to it, a fragmented Pakistani State and, more specifically, a Pashtun population divided by the Durand Line, make the first necessity extremely difficult to achieve. The paper examines these two factors, shows how they combined from 1979 to the rise of the TTP, and then follows the escalation from the Taliban return of 2021 to the war, the Chinese mediation and the plausible future scenarios.

The Primary Cause: Pakistan's Lack of Strategic Depth

The first and decisive factor is that Pakistan lacks "strategic depth": it does not have a land where it can step back in case of an Indian invasion, the true existential threat to the State.[4]

From Islamabad to the Indian border there are only 400 kilometres of completely flat land, meaning that a large-scale conventional offensive could reach the capital city in a few days;[5] it does not matter if New Delhi declares that it has no such intentions: according to Islamabad they will always have this option, and this closeness forces Pakistan to prepare two alternatives, specifically a Plan A and a Plan B:

- With Plan A the Indian offensive is stopped in Punjab with a consequent counteroffensive beyond the border to cut Highway 1A, a crucial pipeline for Indian military equipment;
- Plan B envisages, in case of desperate necessity, a retreat into Afghan territory, which would be possible only with an allied regime in Kabul.[6]

[1] Reuters (2025, October 12). Dozens killed in Pakistan-Afghanistan clashes, border closed. https://uk.news.yahoo.com/dozens-killed-pakistan-afghanistan-clashes-122910461.html
[2] Associated Press (2026, April 27). Afghan officials say Pakistani strikes killed 7 and wounded 85 in first attacks since peace talks. https://www.wsls.com/news/world/2026/04/27/afghan-officials-say-pakistani-strikes-killed-7-and-wounded-85-in-first-attacks-since-peace-talks/
[3] Al Jazeera (2026, September 25). Pakistani forces kill Afghan Taliban fighters in border escalation. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/9/25/pakistani-forces-kill-afghan-taliban-fighters-in-border-escalation; Selber, W. (2026, October 19). Pakistan-Taliban border clashes continue amid diplomatic efforts. FDD's Long War Journal. https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2026/10/pakistan-taliban-border-clashes-continue-amid-diplomatic-efforts.php.
[4] Marshall, T. (2015). Prisoners of geography. London: Elliott & Thompson (Italian edition: Le 10 mappe che spiegano il mondo, Milano: Garzanti, 2016), ch. 7.
[5] Marshall (2015), ch. 7.
[6] Marshall (2015), ch. 7.

For this reason, geography forces both Islamabad and New Delhi to have a strong interest in Afghanistan.

"Strategic depth" is also a doctrine linked to General Mirza Aslam Beg;[7] hence India and Pakistan fight a proxy war over Afghanistan similar to the one in Kashmir.[8] Therefore, Islamabad read the moves New Delhi made in October 2025, when an Indian Embassy was inaugurated in Kabul following an official visit,[9] as an encirclement, resulting in Pakistani accusations against Afghanistan of training terrorists with Indian funding.[10]

The Ethnic Factor: A Fragmented State and a Divided Pashtun Nation

Strategic necessity alone, however, does not explain why Afghanistan is so difficult for Islamabad to manage: the second cause of the conflict is ethnic, and it lies in the very nature of the Pakistani State.

To understand the ethnic roots of this conflict we must first get rid of the Western bias that conceives Pakistan as a monolith of Muslim people from the Indian subcontinent: in fact, the country is a mosaic of ethnicities and its ruling class has always failed to create a homogenous national culture. As Marshall wrote, "Pakistan is a state, but not a nation"; its name is an acronym which stands for Punjab, Afghania, Kashmir, Sindh and Baluchistan, and the only tie between the original two parts of the country, the Islamic religion, was not enough when in 1971 East Pakistan declared independence, helped by India, giving birth to what we now know as Bangladesh.[11]

Pakistani society is composed of 60% Punjabi, 14% Sindhi, 13.5% Pashtun and 4.5% Baluch; each of these groups speaks its own language and refuses Punjabi cultural hegemony: the official national language, Urdu, is the language of the Muslims who fled India for Pakistan in 1947, specifically to the Punjab region.[12] Incredibly, the 2023 census on the inhabitants' mother tongue indicates that Urdu accounts for only 10% of the total population.[13]

A special focus must be given to the Pashtuns, who have never accepted being governed by outsiders, and who live divided between Pakistan and Afghanistan by the Durand Line, a 2,600-km-long border traced in 1893 by Sir Mortimer Durand, Foreign Secretary of British India, to separate Afghanistan from British India; in 1949, despite the initial ratification by the Afghan emirate, Kabul unilaterally annulled the agreement, and still today Pashtun people on both sides ignore the border;[14] the Pakistani part of their territory is known as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, which were formally integrated into the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province only in 2018,[15] but in reality Islamabad has never exercised real authority over them.

[7] Fair, C. C. (2014). Fighting to the end: The Pakistan Army's way of war. New York: Oxford University Press.
[8] Marshall (2015), ch. 7.
[9] Chatham House (2025, October). India is seeking to reset relations with the Taliban. But can this rapprochement last? https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/10/india-seeking-reset-relations-taliban-can-rapprochement-last
[10] Associated Press (2026, February 7). Islamic State affiliate claims suicide bombing at Shiite mosque in Pakistani capital. https://www.bostonglobe.com/2026/02/07/world/islamic-state-affiliate-claims-suicide-bombing-at-shiite-mosque-in-pakistani-capital
[11] Marshall (2015), ch. 7.
[12] Marshall (2015), ch. 7.
[13] Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (2023). 7th Population and Housing Census 2023 (mother-tongue data). https://www.pbs.gov.pk
[14] Barfield, T. (2010). Afghanistan: A cultural and political history. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; Marshall (2015), ch. 7; Rubin, B. R., & Siddique, A. (2006). Resolving the Pakistan-Afghanistan stalemate (USIP Special Report No. 176). Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace.
[15] Constitution (Twenty-fifth Amendment) Act, 2018 (Pakistan), merging the Federally Administered Tribal Areas into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.

Strategic Depth Through Ethnic Proxies: From the Soviet Invasion to the TTP

The history of the last four decades shows how the two factors have intertwined:

A historical example was that of 1979, with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan: India offered its diplomatic support to Moscow, while Pakistan immediately joined the side of the US and Saudi Arabia, helping to provide weapons, training and financing for the Mujahideen against the Red Army.[16] The logistical hub of this axis was Peshawar, in the heart of "Pashtunistan", where weapons, militias, functionaries of the Pakistani intelligence service (ISI) and funds passed through[17]. After the Soviet retreat, the ISI helped to create, and later to economically sustain through American and Saudi financial flows[18], the Taliban movement, composed of Pashtun people, which later succeeded in taking control of Afghanistan; indeed, in the 1990s Pakistan was one of only three countries to recognize the legitimacy of the Taliban Emirate.[19]

The same Pashtun Taliban hosted al-Qaeda terrorists but, after 9/11, Washington asked Pakistan to join the "war on terror" and to stop protecting those armed groups; therefore Islamabad found itself obliged to hit the Taliban whom Pakistan itself had trained and supported only a few years earlier. The Taliban's response was harsh: they took control of several tribal areas, merging the entirety of the Pashtun people and starting to strike back.[20]

Therefore, Pakistan decided to play a double game: to cooperate with Washington, also offering military bases to strike the tribal areas, but at the same time to help the Afghan Taliban, in the hope that, once NATO had gone away, the regime in Kabul would side with Pakistan rather than India.[21] The price was high: the national army lost about 5,000 men and about 50,000 civilians were killed, while in 2011 Bin Laden was found in Abbottabad, a Pakistani city, resulting in a loss of American trust toward Islamabad.[22] The Pakistani Taliban reorganized themselves in the Tehrik-e-Taliban (TTP), born in 2007 after the siege of the Red Mosque in Islamabad.[23] In 2014 the TTP murdered 132 schoolchildren in Peshawar, showing the Pakistani establishment that the organization it had helped create was now a real menace.[24]

From the Taliban Return of 2021 to the War

In 2015 Marshall envisaged three scenarios: the defeat of the Pakistani Taliban by the national army, Islamabad's bankruptcy because of a never-ending campaign, or a compromise following the American withdrawal, conserving the relationship with the Taliban regime in Kabul to preserve the emergency option in case of a conflict with India. According to him, the third option was the most probable;[25] however, the Taliban's return to Kabul in 2021 did not bring a crackdown on the TTP, a situation compounded by the opening of the Indian embassy in Kabul discussed above.[26] Islamabad

[16] Marshall (2015), ch. 7.
[17] Marshall (2015), ch. 7.
[18] Coll, S. (2004). Ghost wars: The secret history of the CIA, Afghanistan, and bin Laden, from the Soviet invasion to September 10, 2001. New York: Penguin Press.
[19] Rashid, A. (2000). Taliban: Militant Islam, oil and fundamentalism in Central Asia. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
[20] Marshall (2015), ch. 7.
[21] Marshall (2015), ch. 7.
[22] Marshall (2015), ch. 7.
[23] Abbas, H. (2014). The Taliban revival: Violence and extremism on the Pakistan-Afghanistan frontier. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
[24] Marshall (2015), ch. 7.
[25] Marshall (2015), ch. 7.
[26] Associated Press (2026, April 3). China says peace talks between Afghanistan and Pakistan are advancing. https://www.wsls.com/news/world/2026/04/03/china-says-peace-talks-between-afghanistan-and-pakistan-are-

answered with economic and demographic pressure: between October 2023 and May 2025 about a million Afghan refugees returned from Pakistan, and for 2025 another 3 million expulsions were expected according to UNHCR.[27]

The escalation that led to war was rapid: after the Doha ceasefire agreement of October 2025, mediated by Turkey and Qatar, the Istanbul peace talks broke down in November;[28] on 6 February a suicide terrorist attack at a Shia mosque in Islamabad killed 31 people, and even though it was claimed by the Pakistani branch of the Islamic State, Islamabad accused Kabul of training the terrorists;[29] in the middle of the following month, after the Pakistani strikes and the Afghan response, Pakistan declared "open war", with a UN-estimated 93,000 refugees.[30]

The Importance of Chinese Mediation

The Chinese role was crucial: in Urumqi, on 1 April, delegations reached an agreement not to intensify the clashes and to explore a final solution.[31] Beijing has two reasons to mediate:

- Afghanistan can become a base for Uyghur militias, an existential threat to China; Foreign Minister Wang Yi even asked the Taliban to act against the Turkestan Islamic Party, whose leadership is based in Afghanistan;[32]
- Pakistan is the energy and commercial backbone of China: the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, worth over 46 billion dollars, links Gwadar to Xinjiang, passing through unstable Baluchistan.[33]

Yet the agreement proved fragile, as the strikes of 27 April and the September escalation showed.[34]

Scenarios and Indicators

The plausible scenarios are three:

1. Chinese mediation produces a stable mechanism of control and safeguarding of the frontier, which would require conditions that the Taliban have never accepted;
2. The conflict remains alive but at a low intensity, with periodic raids, border clashes and uncertain ceasefires: today the most probable scenario;
3. A huge terrorist attack in Pakistan or an escalation with heavy civilian casualties brings the two armies back into direct war.

The indicators to follow are the rhythm of the TTP attacks, the Kabul-New Delhi relationship, the expulsion of Afghan migrants and the opening of border crossings.

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advancing/

[27] ANI/Tolo News (2025, June 9). Over 1 million Afghans return from Pakistan amid deportation drive: UNHCR. The Tribune (India). https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/world/over-1-million-afghans-return-from-pakistan-amid-deportation-drive-unhcr

[28] Reuters (2025, November 8). Afghanistan-Pakistan peace talks collapse, ceasefire continues, Taliban says. https://www.dzrh.com.ph/post/afghanistan-pakistan-peace-talks-collapse-ceasefire-continues-taliban-says

[29] Associated Press (2026, February 7).

[30] Associated Press (2026, April 27).

[31] Associated Press (2026, April 3).

[32] Selber (2026, October 19).

[33] Marshall (2015), ch. 7.

[34] Associated Press (2026, April 27); Al Jazeera (2026, September 25).

Conclusion

To conclude, to understand this war's causes we must start from Pakistani foreign policy, which makes having a friendly regime in Kabul a condition of survival. Strategic geography is thus the primary cause of the conflict, while ethnicity is the factor that makes it so hard to resolve. Nowadays, Afghanistan is ruled by a theocratic regime in which Islamabad has heavily invested for a long time, and which is now getting closer to India; it is the expression of the Pashtun ethnicity, spread across the two states, which, despite the religious affinity, has never accepted the dominance of a foreign power, be it the British Empire of the nineteenth century or the contemporary Punjabi-led Pakistan.[35] The result is a fatal security dilemma: each defensive move made by Islamabad (for example, raids, expulsions, the closing of the borders) is seen with hostility by Kabul, which consequently looks to India for support. Without a solution regarding the frontier and the TTP, the risk is a never-ending cycle of clashes.

[35] Marshall (2015), ch. 7.

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