

Explained: How Pakistan-Afghanistan 'open war' follows a long history of differences

The latest escalation in violence comes after months of tit-for-tat clashes over Islamabad's accusation that Kabul harbours militants carrying out attacks inside Pakistan. But their issues are much deeper, explains a former Ambassador to Afghanistan.

Written by: [Vivek Katju](#) 7 min read New Delhi Updated: Feb 27, 2026 12:30 PM IST



Taliban soldiers carry a rocket launcher in a vehicle, following exchanges of fire between Pakistan and Afghanistan forces, near Torkham border in Afghanistan, February 27, 2026. Reuters

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Pakistan on Friday (February 27) bombed Kabul and two other Afghan provinces, hours after Afghanistan launched a cross-border attack on Pakistani troops.

Pakistan's Defence Minister Khawaja Asif described the situation as an "open war" with Afghanistan's Taliban government.

The latest escalation in violence follows months of tit-for-tat clashes over Islamabad's accusation that Kabul harbours militants carrying out attacks inside Pakistan. But the issues between the two countries go back much farther in history.

Except for brief periods since 1947, Pakistan-Afghanistan ties have been marked by mutual distrust, rancour, recriminations, and hostility.

This negativity between Pakistan and Afghanistan has continued during both civilian and direct military rule in the former, and fundamental system transformations, turmoil and two failed superpower interventions in the latter— by the Soviet Union (1979-1989) and the United States (2001-2021). During both, Pakistan has helped the Afghan resistance.

Regime changes in Afghanistan

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Afghanistan witnessed the end of the monarchy in 1973, and a brief period of nationalist rule followed by 11 years under a communist government till 1989, during which the state unsuccessfully sought to change society and polity. Thence came a three-year stretch of nationalist President Najibullah, whose rule collapsed in 1992. That led to nine years of civil war between the erstwhile Mujahideen and the

Taliban, who emerged in 1994 and with Pakistan's help swiftly took over large swathes of Afghan territory, including Kabul, in 1996.

The Taliban were ousted from Afghanistan into Pakistan in end-2001 through a US invasion because of the Al-Qaeda terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. The US created an Islamic Afghan Republic, which failed to take root. On their part, US forces were unsuccessful in defeating the Taliban insurgency.

Accepting defeat, the US withdrew from Afghanistan in August 2021. The Taliban, again with Pakistan's assistance, militarily defeated their Afghan opponents and this time became masters of all Afghanistan.

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Many outstanding issues

The issues that divide Afghanistan and Pakistan range from Afghanistan's refusal to recognise the Durand Line as the international border, to control over transit and trade, and social contradictions despite the bonds of Islamic faith.

Afghans governments and peoples have the persistent resentment that Pakistan has insensitively tried to control and exploit them, especially since their monarchical system was overthrown.

Pakistan continues to consider Afghans *ahsanfaramosh* (ungrateful). For, they hosted millions of Afghan refugees and enabled Afghan insurgencies to defeat two super powers.

And, finally, the shadow of India has always loomed large over Afghan-Pakistan bilateral ties.

Durand Line

For the Afghan Pashtun, the 2,640-km Durand Line is a historical wound. It derives its name from Sir Mortimer Durand, Foreign Secretary of British India, who compelled Afghan ruler Amir Abdul Rehman Khan to accept a division of his

territories in 1893. This also meant division of the Pashtun tribes who were till then his “subjects”.

In a recent thesis on the Durand Line, Afghan scholar Nabi Sahak correctly points out that “the original purpose of the Durand Line was to define a zone of British and Afghan spheres of influence... the line was not to create a permanent international border, unlike the current popular view dominant in Pakistan and the West”.

However, once demarcated, the British rulers of India considered it as a permanent international border. That is what Pakistan during its creation also contented. Afghanistan rejected that interpretation. Prior to Britain’s departure from India in 1947, Afghanistan urged it to relinquish the Durand Line Agreement. That would have meant that all the Pashtun lands ceded to British India would revert to Afghanistan, effectively making the Indus as the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. The British refused to do so. Consequently, Afghanistan became the only country to oppose Pakistan’s entry into the UN.

Daud Khan, cousin of King Zahir Shah and Prime Minister from 1953-63, supported the cause of Pashtunistan, which aimed to merge all Pakistan’s Pashtun lands with Afghanistan. Hostilities broke out between the two countries in 1961. Pakistan closed its land border with Afghanistan, causing shortages. This led to Afghanistan’s greater dependence on the Soviet Union, its other neighbour.

Daud deposed Zahir Shah and became President in 1973. He revived the idea of Pashtunistan but had to abandon it because of Pakistan fomenting trouble and again closing the border.

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By 1976, Daud and Pakistan Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto had normalised bilateral ties, but like others before and after him, Daud did not accept the Durand Line as the international border.

Indeed, when Pakistan extinguished Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa’s Tribal Agencies in 2018, then Afghan President Ashraf Ghani officially protested.

Trade and transit

Afghanistan is land-locked. Its possible transit routes are via Pakistan, Iran, and the Central Asian Republics, which were earlier part of the Soviet Union.

Of these, the Pakistan route is preferred. All Afghan governments want Pakistan to allow India-Afghan trade to move by road from Wagah to Afghanistan, but Pakistan has stubbornly refused Indian exports — and effectively, Indian aid — to go through this route. This has caused negative feelings in Afghanistan.

However, what causes greater anger is when Pakistan prevents goods from entering Afghanistan either through land routes from Pakistan or via the Karachi port.

Thus, Pakistan uses connectivity and transit as instruments of coercion.

Pashtun-Punjabi divide

There have been historical differences between the way of life of the Pashtuns and the people living south and east of the Indus river. It is true that the Pakistan state has co-opted many Pathans in its KP province and there are large Pathan populations —both of KP and of Afghan origin—especially in Karachi, but the differences have not been bridged.

The Pakistani Pathans, supported by their Afghan brethren, have considered the extinction of the Tribal Agencies as an insult to their way of life by the Punjab-dominated Pakistan state and army. That is one reason why the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) is considered as kin by the Afghan Pashtuns. Today, this is the real bone of contention.

The 'gratitude' question

Pakistan feels that it hosted Afghan refugees and seven Mujahideen groups during the Afghan Jihad against the Soviets. But for this, Afghanistan would have come firmly under the Soviet heel.

It is also convinced that it was its help that enabled the Taliban to defeat the US. Hence, the feeling is that Afghanistan's present rulers and people should be grateful

to it.

On the other hand, the Afghans are bitter about their treatment in Pakistan, and hold that Islamabad's policies during these periods served its own interests. So, Pakistan's demand for gratitude is misplaced.

The India angle

Pakistan has always feared being squeezed by India and Afghanistan simultaneously. They therefore want Kabul to limit its ties with India. But no Afghan government wants its foreign policy choices to be made in Islamabad. That is a source of permanent tension between the two countries.

Today, Pakistan is convinced that the Taliban are hurting Pakistan's interests by opening up to India and that is, for them, unforgivable ingratitude.

Vivek Katju has been India's Ambassador to Afghanistan.

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