



# IPS INSIGHTS

Perspectives On the Issues Shaping Policy

## Pakistan-Afghanistan: The Changing Tides of War

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Since late February 2026, Pakistan and Afghanistan have been engaged in military confrontation, which is arguably the most intense since the Afghan Taliban came to power in August 2021. The recent escalation of hostilities comes after Pakistan exercised its right to defend national sovereignty and human lives, which were violated because of the Taliban's unprovoked attack along 53 Pakistan-Afghanistan border posts. Though there is a clear asymmetry between Pakistan and Afghan military capabilities, the latter has resorted to a sub-conventional war, having four dimensions: forging allegiance, outsourcing of Afghan soil, abetting through men and material, and exercising the policy of employing and denying a diplomatic and political coverage. On the contrary, since August 2021, Pakistan's response has been

characterized by diplomatic engagement, a regional approach, mediation, and counter-terrorism military operations on the internal front. However, this strategic patience of Pakistan towards Afghanistan has been exhausted in the face of the Taliban regime's intransigence to any peaceful overtures, the presence of Afghan footprints in the heinous terror attacks against Pakistani civilians and military personnel, and the group's engagement with India to the detriment of Pakistan.

The recent renewal of hostilities witnessed Pakistan using its right of self-defence by striking the hideouts and training camps of terrorists (such as TTP) on Afghan soil. The Taliban regime, however, miscalculated the strengths of Pakistan on the conventional front and declared war by attacking border

posts all along the international border. The moment was seized by Pakistan, bringing about a strategic shift in its dealings with the terror nexus cast in Afghanistan. The contours of Pakistan's dealings with the Afghanistan-based threats and challenges have emerged more defined and bold in its geo-strategic architecture. This element of strategic clarity is more pronounced and getting traction in the polarized political dispensation of Pakistan and the politico-ethnic divide of Afghanistan. This is creating a realization in Pakistan and Afghanistan that zero tolerance is the primary option in dealing with state-sponsored terrorists and that extending patronage to the terror outfits has a cost to pay, respectively. Pakistan has both the watch and the time to employ and deploy the chosen weapon system at the time of its choosing against the priority list of targets. Given this, Pakistan has the liberty to employ available kinetic tools in the preemptive, protective, and proactive modes according to emerging scenarios.

As control on the tactical terrain, the operational battlefield, and the strategic domain are the main determinants of dominance in any conflict, the destruction of Afghan check posts along the border, the dismantling of the launching pads, and training centres in the battlefield and the neutralization of Afghanistan command and control centres, logistics, weapons and ammo dumps in the strategic zones are meant to impose the will on the adversary. The conflict is gradually going through this phase, which may lead to the removal of

the Taliban regime's centers of gravity in Kabul, Kandahar, and Khost.

Given this realization, a reshaping is silently taking place in Afghanistan, as indicated by the text of the Eid message by Hibatullah Akhundzada that is said to be well deliberated and phrased under the current environment. Additionally, there are a few inferences to be drawn under the prevailing circumstances. Firstly, the purpose and causes of the war-like situation have been deliberately ignored. Secondly, there is no reference to the TTP under the oath of allegiance and their fate and future. This has probably been left to the Haqqanis to take ownership. Thirdly, a vague caution about the internal affairs of Afghanistan, without naming any country or power, is indicative of taking a low position, showing that respective situations in Palestine, Iran, Israel, the US, the Gulf States, and the war itself do not count in his scheme of things. It means that Hibatullah Akhundzada's hands are full in his native domain. Lastly, the message is moderate in tone, contrary to the Afghans' traditional brags and bravado syndrome, indicating that it could be a prelude to the prevailing of sense and sanity in the hierarchy. As, after all, the burden of history, the test of posterity, and the conduct of war are too heavy on the ownership plinth.

For Pakistan, given its right to defend, it is standing on a high moral ground in fighting against the terror outfits posing a potential threat to the regional peace on the soil of an internationally isolated Taliban regime.

