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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Pakistan-Afghanistan Conflict — India's Strategic Calculus

THE HINDU

19 March 2026

SUBJECTS COVERED**IR SECURITY & DEFENCE****GS PAPERS****GS2****CURATED & WRITTEN BY****Bharat Choudhary**

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MAINS RELEVANCE:

GS Paper 2



INTERVIEW ANGLE

"What should India's policy be toward the Pakistan-Afghanistan conflict given its historical investments in Afghanistan and its adversarial relationship with Pakistan?"

WHY IN NEWS

Pakistan's military conducted F-16 airstrikes and artillery bombardments inside Afghan territory targeting Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) hideouts in Paktika and Khost provinces, triggering a furious response from the Afghan Taliban government, which recalled its ambassador from Islamabad and threatened retaliation — placing India in an acutely uncomfortable diplomatic position between two hostile neighbours.

A BORDER THAT WAS NEVER ACCEPTED

The current crisis has deep structural roots that no counter-terrorism operation can resolve. The Durand Line — a 2,640-kilometre boundary drawn by British India's Foreign Secretary Sir Henry Mortimer Durand in 1893 — has never been accepted by any Afghan government as a legitimate international frontier. Neither the monarchies, nor the Soviet-backed communist governments, nor the mujahideen factions, nor the first Taliban government (1996–2001), nor the US-backed Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (2001–2021), nor the current Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) has formally recognised the Durand Line as Afghanistan's legal border with Pakistan. This is not a minor diplomatic dispute; it is the foundational grievance underlying the entire Pakistan-Afghanistan relationship.

Pakistan's strikes in March 2026 are therefore not merely a counter-terrorism operation — they are, in Afghan eyes, an act of aggression against sovereign territory. The Afghan Taliban government's decision to recall its ambassador from Islamabad and issue a public threat of retaliation marks a dramatic deterioration in a relationship that was already under severe strain.

THE TTP PROBLEM PAKISTAN CANNOT SOLVE

The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), also known as the Pakistani Taliban, is the proximate cause of the current escalation. The TTP, designated as a terrorist organisation by Pakistan (and by the US in 2010), has been conducting a sustained insurgency against the Pakistani state since its founding in 2007. After the Afghan Taliban's takeover of Kabul in August 2021, the TTP gained an enormous strategic windfall: a sympathetic government in Kabul that, while not formally endorsing the TTP, was unwilling to suppress it and shared significant ideological and ethnic kinship with its leadership.

Since 2022, TTP attacks inside Pakistan have surged dramatically. The TTP is responsible for bombings targeting Pakistani military installations, police stations, and civilian markets primarily in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) province and the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Pakistan has repeatedly pressured the Afghan Taliban to act against TTP sanctuaries — and the Afghan Taliban has repeatedly refused, arguing that the TTP problem is Pakistan's domestic political failure, not Afghanistan's responsibility.

Pakistan's military, having exhausted diplomatic channels, has now chosen the path of kinetic action across the Durand Line. The strikes, using F-16 multi-role fighter jets (supplied by the United States) and artillery, claim to have targeted TTP training camps and command centres. The Afghan Taliban disputes this, asserting that civilian villages were hit and providing death toll figures that Pakistan refuses to confirm.

INDIA'S STRUCTURAL DILEMMA

India occupies a uniquely difficult position in this conflict — and its difficulty is not accidental. It is the product of deliberate strategic investments, historical relationships, and the fundamental tension between India's two most consequential bilateral adversaries sharing a contested border.

India's Investment in Afghanistan: Since 2001, India has committed approximately \$3 billion to Afghan reconstruction — making it one of the largest regional donors to Afghanistan. Key projects include the Salma Dam (also called the Afghan-India Friendship Dam) in Herat province, inaugurated by Prime Ministers Modi and Ghani in 2016; the Zaranj-Delaram Highway (218 km), connecting Afghanistan to Iran's road network and giving Afghanistan access to Chabahar Port; the Afghan Parliament building in Kabul; and extensive capacity-building programmes including thousands of scholarships for Afghan students in Indian universities. These investments were made with a clear strategic purpose: to maintain an Indian footprint in Afghanistan and prevent Pakistani dominance of Kabul's foreign policy.

India and the Afghan Taliban: India has no formal diplomatic relations with the Afghan Taliban government (IEA), which took power in August 2021. India shut its embassy in Kabul and evacuated staff during the chaotic withdrawal. However, India has since re-established a limited presence in Kabul through a technical mission — a pragmatic recognition that complete disengagement serves no one's interests. India's position on Taliban recognition mirrors that of most democracies: it has not extended formal recognition but has not imposed comprehensive sanctions either.

India's Pakistan Calculus: There is a frank reality that Indian strategic analysts acknowledge privately but rarely state publicly: Pakistan's entanglement with the TTP and its deteriorating relationship with the Afghan Taliban is not obviously against India's interests. A Pakistan consumed by internal security crises has fewer resources to devote to cross-border terrorism against India. The Pakistani military's strategic failure in Afghanistan — having backed the Taliban's return to power expecting a compliant client state, only to receive a hostile neighbour — is, from a narrow Indian strategic perspective, a welcome development.

WHY INDIA CANNOT SIMPLY STAY SILENT

Despite the temptation to watch from the sidelines, India's silence carries real costs.

The Humanitarian Argument: Pakistani airstrikes that kill Afghan civilians are a humanitarian issue, and India's claim to Global South leadership — articulated at the G20 and the Voice of Global South Summits — rings hollow if India cannot bring itself to call for restraint when civilians are bombed by a nuclear-armed state.

The SCO Principle: Both Pakistan and Afghanistan hold membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), of which India is also a full member since 2017. The SCO's foundational principles include non-interference in the internal affairs of member states and respect for territorial integrity. Pakistan's strikes inside Afghanistan are a visible breach of these principles. India's silence weakens the institutional credibility of an organisation it has invested political capital in.

The Precedent Problem: India has long argued that state-sponsored cross-border terrorism — referring to Pakistani support for militant groups operating against India — is a violation of international norms and sovereignty. If India stays silent when Pakistan bombs another country under the rubric of counter-terrorism, it weakens its own moral standing to complain when Pakistan uses similar justifications for activities targeting India.

WHAT INDIA SHOULD DO

The Hindu's editorial position is that India should adopt a clearly articulated, principled call for dialogue and de-escalation — without taking sides between the Pakistani military and the Afghan Taliban. This means calling publicly for an immediate halt to airstrikes, urging Pakistan to pursue grievances through diplomatic channels, and supporting international mediation efforts (including through the SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure, RATS). India should also use its limited but real engagement with the Afghan Taliban to urge the IEA to separate the TTP issue from the broader question of bilateral relations.

India's deeper long-term interest is a stable, sovereign Afghanistan that is not a Pakistani client state. That outcome requires an Afghanistan that is not driven into Pakistan's arms by international isolation, and a Pakistan-Afghanistan relationship that finds a political framework for coexistence — however imperfect. India's role in nudging that process, even quietly, is more valuable than strategic schadenfreude.

UPSC RELEVANCE

Durand Line (1893); Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP); Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA); SCO — Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS); Zaranj-Delaram Highway; Salma Dam (Afghan-India Friendship Dam); Chabahar Port; F-16 — US-origin fighter jet; Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK).

MAINS GS-2:

India's neighbourhood-first policy and its limitations; India's engagement with Afghanistan post-Taliban takeover; Pakistan as a state sponsor of terrorism — India's position in multilateral forums; SCO — India's role and the principle of non-interference; India's strategic investments in Afghanistan and the return on diplomatic capital; Extended neighbourhood — India's approach to Central and West Asia.

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

DURAND LINE — KEY FACTS:

Length: 2,640 km (Pakistan-Afghanistan border)

Established: November 12, 1893 — signed by Sir Henry Mortimer Durand (Foreign Secretary, British India) and Abdur Rahman Khan (Amir of Afghanistan)

Status: Never formally recognised by any Afghan government as a legitimate international boundary

Significance: Bisects Pashtun tribal territories — fundamental source of Pakistan-Afghanistan friction

TEHRIK-I-TALIBAN PAKISTAN (TTP):

Founded: December 2007; founding leader — Baitullah Mehsud

Current leader: Noor Wali Mehsud (also known as Abu Mansoor Asim; since 2018)

US designation as Foreign Terrorist Organisation (FTO): September 2010

Distinct from Afghan Taliban: TTP targets Pakistani state; Afghan Taliban targets foreign occupation of Afghanistan — different objectives, shared ideology and ethnicity (Pashtun)

Base: Afghan-Pakistan border regions (Kunar, Nuristan, Paktika, Khost provinces in Afghanistan)

Major attacks (since 2022): Peshawar mosque bombing (January 2023, 100+ killed); Bajaur mosque attack (July 2023, 50+ killed)

ISLAMIC EMIRATE OF AFGHANISTAN (IEA — AFGHAN TALIBAN):

Returned to power: August 15, 2021 (fall of Kabul)

Not formally recognised by any UN member state (as of 2026)

India's status: No formal recognition; limited technical mission in Kabul re-established 2022

Afghan Taliban ≠ TTP: Cooperating organisations with distinct agendas; Afghan Taliban reluctant to suppress TTP

INDIA'S AFGHANISTAN INVESTMENTS (2001–2021):

Total committed: ~\$3 billion (one of largest regional donors)

Salma Dam (Afghan-India Friendship Dam): 42 MW hydropower; Herat province; inaugurated June 2016 by PM Modi and President Ghani

Zaranj-Delaram Highway: 218 km; connects Afghan ring road to Iran's Milak border post; gives Afghanistan Chabahar access

Afghan Parliament building: Kabul; constructed by India; inaugurated December 2015

Scholarships: thousands of Afghan students trained in India under ICCR and technical cooperation programmes

PAKISTAN MILITARY'S STRIKE DETAILS:

Aircraft used: F-16 multi-role fighter jets (US-origin; Pakistan operates Block 15/52 variants)

Provinces struck: Paktika and Khost (eastern Afghanistan, bordering KPK)

Afghan Taliban response: recalled ambassador from Islamabad; threatened retaliation; described as "act of war"

SCO RELEVANCE:

Shanghai Cooperation Organisation founded: June 2001 (Shanghai)

India: full member since June 2017 (Astana Summit)

Pakistan: full member since June 2017

Afghanistan: observer status (not full member as of 2026)

SCO-RATS (Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure): headquartered in Tashkent; coordinates counter-terrorism among SCO members

SCO Charter principles: respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, non-interference in internal affairs

CHABAHAR PORT (INDIA-IRAN CONNECTIVITY):

Location: Sistan-Baluchestan province, southeastern Iran (Gulf of Oman)

India's role: developing Shahid Beheshti terminal; 10-year operational contract signed May 2024

Strategic purpose: India-Afghanistan-Central Asia trade route bypassing Pakistan

Connected to: Zaranj-Delaram Highway → Afghanistan; International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) → Russia/Central Asia

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

Pakistan's nuclear status: declared nuclear weapons state (1998 Chagai tests); estimated 160–170 warheads (SIPRI 2025)

F-16 supplied by US to Pakistan: subject to end-use monitoring; US has previously objected to use against non-terrorist targets

India-Pakistan Line of Control (LoC): 740 km; compared to Durand Line's 2,640 km — both are disputed borders of colonial origin

Operation Dost (2023): India sent humanitarian aid to earthquake-affected Afghanistan — demonstrates India's continued soft power engagement despite no formal Taliban recognition

FATA merger: Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas merged into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in May 2018 — administrative change that has not resolved security challenges in the region

Sources: The Hindu, Ministry of External Affairs, SIPRI

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