

As explosions echo along the Durand Line and airstrikes pound Kabul, Pakistan's decades-long bet on the Taliban has detonated into catastrophe. What began as a bid for "strategic depth" against India has morphed into a declared "open war," with the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) thriving, refugees fleeing en masse, and global censure mounting.

Pakistan midwifed the Taliban's rise, sheltering its leaders and betting on a friendly Kabul to neutralize militants and counter India. The 2021 takeover promised payoff, until the TTP, ideological cousins, exploded from Afghan sanctuaries. By 2025, TTP attacks ravaged Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, killing scores; 37 strikes hit nine districts in early 2026 alone. Taliban inaction, viewing TTP as Pakistan's mess, prompted coercion: border closures gutted Afghan trade, while February 22 airstrikes targeted seven TTP/ISKP camps in Nangarhar and Paktika, claiming 80 militants dead.

Civilian toll, 18 killed, including children, ignited fury. Afghanistan retaliated on February 26 with drone strikes and clashes across Kandahar to Nuristan, seizing outposts and killing 55 Pakistanis, per Kabul. Pakistan's Operation Ghazab Lil Haq followed: 46 airstrikes hit Kabul, Kandahar, and Paktia, capturing 32 square kilometers in the Ghudwana enclave. Defense Minister Khawaja Asif proclaimed "open war," as clashes raged into March, downing drones and claiming 150 Taliban dead.

Parallel to the blitz, Pakistan's deportation drive, which has expelled over 1.5 million Afghans since 2023, has supercharged the crisis. Targeting 1.4 million PoR holders, it features raids, bribes, and camp razings, slamming returnees into Taliban peril. Amnesty International decried the "unlawful" push in January 2026, noting 115,000 arrests; Human Rights Watch highlighted persecution risks amid Afghanistan's repression.

Escalation worsens it: strikes displace thousands in border provinces, with the UN logging 110 civilian deaths by March 4. Deportees fuel TTP recruitment, draining Pakistan's labor pool and hiking costs in a teetering economy.

Pakistan's playbook, nurture Taliban, coerce compliance, crumbled. Taliban defiance stems from sovereignty claims and TTP ties; strikes only unified Kabul against Islamabad. India gains as Afghanistan eyes Chabahar; China mediates amid U.S. unease. Economically, border chaos slashes trade; security drains resources from floods and debt.

Fast-forward to the current spiral, shelling, outpost grabs, "open war" rhetoric, signals breakdown. Ceasefires via Qatar and Riyadh fray; TTP exploits chaos. Pakistan faces radical influx, isolation, and potential wider war.

Islamabad must de-escalate: multilateral TTP talks, refugee safeguards, and economic ties. Coercion yielded blowback; realism beckons before the frontier ignites regionally.