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**From Riyadh to Kabul: Pakistan's**  
**Western Security Dilemma**

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**Executive Summary**

- ✦ The war with Afghanistan and the need to protect Saudi Arabia erodes Pakistan's strategic depth, and reduces its capacity for mobilisation on the Indian border respectively.
- ✦ Pakistan is trying to demonstrate continued relevance to partners such as the United States and Saudi Arabia without provoking domestic Shia constituencies or anti-Western factions and while avoiding a further downturn in ties with Iran.
- ✦ Simultaneously it seeks to rebuild a workable relationship with Afghanistan even as it sustains pressure on Kabul over the presence and activities of the TTP.
- ✦ Regional instability threatens Beijing's economic and security interests in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Tajikistan, and its ability to counter Indian influence in Afghanistan. It may also not be seen as a neutral arbiter by the Afghan Taliban.
- ✦ Pakistan's 'Afghan dilemma' is compounded by the Iran-US war and domestic issues and impacts its calibration with India on the eastern front.

**Key Picture: Pakistan Afghanistan Iran Border Security Map 2024**



Source: [ThemediaLine](https://www.themedialine.com)

## 1. Falling Out: Old Friends, New Enemies

Pakistan finds itself reprising its strategic importance in West and Central Asia, driven in part by the region's tense geopolitical environment and by its ongoing efforts to balance relations between the United States and China to preserve strategic autonomy vis-à-vis India. At the same time, it confronts significant domestic turbulence, including a fragile economy and the consolidation of power around a new "Caesar" in the form of Asim Munir.

### 1.1. The Taliban

Since the 1990s and then in the 2000s the Taliban found an ally in Afghanistan. Even as Pakistan voiced support for the US led invasion of Afghanistan, it gave safe harbour to Taliban's leadership particularly to Mullah Omar. The return of the Taliban in 2021 was seen by Pakistan as an opportunity to curb India's influence in the region that it had cultivated during the presidencies of Ashraf Ghani and Hamid Karzai. Even democratic factions in Pakistan, notably the former Prime Minister Imran Khan voiced support saying that the Afghans had "broken the shackles of slavery".<sup>1</sup>

Despite its reliance on Pakistan, the Afghan Taliban has allowed bilateral differences to remain largely in abeyance rather than fully resolving them. Thorny issues such as the Durand line - the international border between the two countries that is not recognised by Afghanistan - and importantly the Afghan Taliban's support for the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) - also known as the Pakistan Taliban - have resurfaced after the Taliban secured Afghanistan.

### 1.2. The Pakistan Taliban

As Pakistan pursued its offensive against the Al-Qaida, disparate militant groups coalesced to form the Pakistan Taliban with the objective of overthrowing the government of Pakistan in order to establish an emirate based on its interpretation of Islamic law.<sup>2</sup> The inability or reluctance of the Afghan Taliban to act on Pakistan's request to not provide safe haven to the TTP has resulted in Pakistan resorting to military action such as Operation Azm-e-Istehkam since 2024.

For Beijing these hostilities are a hindrance to its influence and its image as the 'big brother' in the region. China is undertaking concerted diplomatic effort to mediate the matter. In March Yue Xiaoyang, China's special envoy for Afghanistan met with both sides. Soon after Wang Yi, China's foreign minister spoke with his Pakistani counterpart.<sup>3</sup> For China the US\$ 65 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a vital artery to the Arabian sea that needs to be protected against attacks from the TTP. Further, perceived success or continued diplomatic support for the TTP would send the wrong signals to the East Turkestan Islamic Movement - a Uyghur nationalist organization - that now operates from Afghanistan. Attacks on Chinese workers in Tajikistan close to the border with Afghanistan adds to China's anxiety.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile Russia, which is the only country to officially recognise the Afghan Taliban government, has called for negotiations. However, its engagement in the region remains limited to safeguarding its core interests and ensuring the survival of the Afghan Taliban.

### 1.3. The India Dynamic

The reluctance of the Afghan Taliban to curb the activities of the TTP in Afghanistan dents Pakistan's objective of diplomatically securing Afghanistan to develop 'strategic depth' against India.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile India is cultivating Afghanistan as a counter to a new Bangladesh that is amicable to Islamabad.<sup>6</sup> The Afghan Taliban is a vital partner for China for trade and as a hedge against India, however, its concerns over attacks on Chinese citizens

in Tajikistan's, the potential for attacks on the CEPC, and the recent collapse of a major oil deal<sup>7</sup> may make it difficult for China to be a neutral arbiter.

## 2. Stuck between a Friend and a Neighbour

Pakistan's confrontation with the Taliban is not occurring in isolation. It occurs while Islamabad is also being drawn into a broader Western security crisis influenced by Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United States. This is significant because the Afghanistan–Pakistan conflict is already testing Pakistan's military and political capacity. Pakistan is dismissing talks with Kabul and escalating strikes against Taliban infrastructure at a time when instability on its other western flank is increasing.<sup>8</sup>

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### 2.1 Future Policy Moves

This is where the Pakistan–Saudi relationship becomes significant. In September 2025, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia signed a Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement stating that aggression against one would be regarded as aggression against both. Saudi officials described it as a comprehensive defensive arrangement covering “all military means,” which suggests that it could potentially extend Pakistan's nuclear umbrella into Gulf security, even if Pakistani officials avoided stating this explicitly.<sup>9</sup> That pact gives Pakistan strategic importance in Riyadh, but it also presents a challenge. Pakistan is Saudi Arabia's security partner, yet Iran is not a distant adversary. It is a neighbour with whom Pakistan shares a long and sensitive border.

That neighbourhood constraint was already evident in January 2024, when Iran and Pakistan engaged in reciprocal cross-border strikes against militant targets. Pakistan claimed that its retaliation targeted terrorist hideouts inside Iran after Tehran had struck Pakistani territory two days earlier. Although both sides acted swiftly to prevent escalation, the incident demonstrated how fragile the relationship is and how easily border insecurity can escalate into interstate confrontation.<sup>10</sup>

The U.S. attack on Iran intensified that contradiction. Pakistan officially condemned the U.S. strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities on 22 June 2025, describing them as violations of international law and asserting that Iran had a legitimate right to defend itself under the UN Charter.<sup>11</sup> That response was more than ideological or rhetorical; it was also strategic. Islamabad sought to avoid being perceived, domestically or regionally, as supporting an anti-Iran escalation, especially since it was already engaged on the Afghan front.

### 2.2. Tensions At Home

Domestic politics make that balancing act even more challenging. Anger among Pakistan's Shia population after the U.S.-Israeli assault on Iran triggered protests in several cities, highlighting how conflict in West Asia can quickly spill into Pakistan's internal political landscape.<sup>12</sup> Pakistan therefore faces pressures from different sides. On the one hand, Pakistan must balance its security partnership with Saudi Arabia and its desire to remain strategically valuable to Washington while on the other, it must contend with the constraints of geography, sectarian sensitivities, and the imperatives of neighbourhood diplomacy.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, Pakistan must also grapple with challenges in the economy. Oil prices have reached historic highs while its fiscal deficit remains high, meanwhile the strict fiscal conditions of its US\$ 7 billion IMF loan give it little leeway to address the issue.<sup>14</sup>

The likely outcome Pakistan will aim for would be to maintain the state quo. Pakistan will endeavour to maintain its Saudi security partnership, avoid a direct break with Iran, and continue condemning broader regional escalation. However, this is a tough balancing act. The more the Afghanistan conflict deepens and the longer Iran remains under external pressure, the more difficult it will be for Pakistan to act as if these are separate theatres. They are increasingly part of the same western security dilemma.

### 3. Conclusion

Pakistan's western security challenges now reveal a deeper weakness in its foreign policy. The conflict with the Taliban demonstrates that Islamabad has failed to turn influence in Afghanistan into lasting security. Simultaneously, the Iran crisis has highlighted the risks of Pakistan's broader regional balancing strategy. Its alliance with Saudi Arabia provides strategic relevance, but its geography, domestic sectarian sensitivities, and economic vulnerabilities prevent it from adopting a clear anti-Iran stance. As a result, its foreign policy is becoming increasingly reactive rather than consistent. Pakistan is attempting to manage conflicts on multiple fronts while dealing with financial pressures at home, political instability, and rising external dependence. This does not mean Islamabad has no room for manoeuvre, but it suggests that its traditional strategy of hedging between allies, neighbours, and great powers is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain. Therefore, Pakistan's western dilemma is not temporary and reflects a wider crisis of statecraft.

## NOTES

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