[**Trouble on the western frontier**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1726252/trouble-on-the-western-frontier)

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IF there were any illusions about Pakistan having secured peace on its western frontier after the Afghan Taliban’s [return to power](https://www.dawn.com/news/1640974) last August, they should have been dispelled by now.

The escalation in border clashes and the Afghan Taliban’s patronage of the Pakistani outlawed militant network have heightened national security concerns in this country. The mounting tension between the two countries is ominous.

It is not only Pakistani security forces but also the civilian population that is being targeted in cross-border attacks. The latest [incident of gunfire](https://www.dawn.com/news/1725806/6-dead-17-injured-in-chaman-as-afghan-border-forces-open-unprovoked-indiscriminate-firing-on-civilians-ispr) and heavy artillery shelling by Afghan security forces at the Chaman border has left several civilians dead or wounded. Some casualties have also been reported on the Afghan side in retaliatory action by Pakistan’s security forces. The border was opened after an apology from the Afghan side but the situation remains highly combustible.

Over the last few months, there has been a marked increase in the exchange of fire between the two forces, resulting in the [frequent closure](https://www.dawn.com/news/1721346) of the Chaman border, affecting trade and travel. Last month, the border was closed for several days after an Afghan security guard shot and killed a Pakis­tani security official and wounded two others.

That set off an intense exchange of fire between the two sides, reportedly leaving several Afghan soldiers dead. Such exchanges have created a very volatile situation.

A major cause of tension has been the Taliban objection to Pakistan’s fencing of the border. Last week’s exchange of fire started when Afghans tried to cut a part of the border fencing.

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While Chaman, which is the busiest transit trade route to Afghanistan, has been the major flashpoint, clashes have also been reported from other crossings in the former tribal districts. These point to the increasingly confrontational ties between Pakistan and the Taliban regime next door.

In fact, in challenging Pakistan’s right to fence the Durand Line area, the Taliban have gone so far as to remove barriers at several points of the frontier.

In order to deter illegal traffic and formalise the border, Pakistan has been putting up barricades along the 2,400-kilometre-long frontier, which had hitherto allowed easy movement for tribes straddling both sides. Like other Afghan governments in the past, the Taliban administration, too, does not recognise the Durand Line as a permanent border.

It seeks to have open frontiers for the Pakhtun tribesmen inhabiting the region. It may be a valid demand that the tribesmen living on both sides of the border should be allowed free movement, but the refusal to recognise the border doesn’t have any justification.

In many cases, Pakistani Taliban being sheltered by the Kabul administration have been involved in dismantling the demarcation. Pakistan has handled this provocation prudently so far, to avoid making it a contentious issue. But the spike in border clashes is alarming.

In fact, the border fire escalation is symptomatic of a more serious problem. The Afghan Taliban’s increasingly aggressive stance cannot be seen in isolation. It is not just the border stand-off but also the militant sanctuaries in Afghanistan that have caused strains in relations between Islamabad and the Taliban regime.

The situation has become highly volatile after the banned Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) [called off its ceasefire](https://www.dawn.com/news/1723647) with Pakistan and stepped up cross-border attacks on Pakistani security forces in the tribal districts.

Curiously, the latest escalation on the Chaman border has happened days after the attempt on the life of Pakistan’s envoy in Kabul. The incident carried the mark of the TTP, which is closely aligned with the militant Islamic State group’s Khorasan chapter (IS-K) that claimed responsibility for the attack.

The Afghan Taliban’s overt patronage of the outlawed Pakistani militant network cannot be delinked with the mounting border tension.

The continuing ideological connection of the Taliban regime with some transnational militant groups not only threatens regional security but also endangers Afghanistan’s own stability. The increasing terrorist violence in the country is the result of the Taliban’s reluctance to act against some foreign militant groups.

Just days after the attack on the diplomatic mission, militants [raided a hotel in Kabul](https://www.dawn.com/news/1725992) used by Chinese businesspeople and other foreign visitors. This attack, too, has been claimed by the IS-K, which is claiming most attacks. The increase in terrorist attacks in recent months belies the Taliban claim that it has improved security since returning to power last August.

While China has yet to formally recognise the Taliban government, it is one of the few countries to have a full diplomatic presence there. There are problems though: the presence of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), a Chinese Muslim separatist group closely aligned with the IS-K, in Afghanistan is a contentious issue between Beijing and Kabul. The Taliban have refused to expel the militant group.

Notwithstanding the Taliban assurance that Afghanistan is safe for diplomats and businessmen, there has been a marked rise in terrorist attacks targeting foreign diplomats and visitors. Two staff members of the Russian embassy died in a [suicide attack](https://www.dawn.com/news/1708559) that took place outside the mission in September. That attack too was claimed by the IS-K.

Such attacks have justifiably reinforced the fears of the international community of Afghanistan becoming a safe haven for transnational militant groups and have further increased the isolation of the conservative regime that has not yet been formally recognised by any country.

The regime’s refusal to cut off its ideological links with groups such as the TTP, ETIM and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan has provided a favourable environment to global terrorist groups to operate in.

The unholy alliance of Afghan-based militant groups presents a security threat to the entire region. The recent surge in terrorist attacks inside Pakistan is rooted in the Afghan Taliban’s patronage of global terrorist networks.

Pakistan needs to review its policy on dealing with the Afghan Taliban regime in order to make its western border secure. It is important to engage with the Taliban administration but Islamabad must also take a firm position on the terrorist attacks stemming from Afghanistan.

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