

Pakistan and Afghanistan agree to shaky truce after week of clashes

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Pakistan and Afghanistan agreed to a shaky truce last weekend in talks mediated by Qatar and Turkey, after more than a week of military clashes in which scores and likely hundreds died.

Relations between Pakistan's military dominated government and Afghanistan's Taliban regime have progressively deteriorated over several years. Even amid the current ceasefire, Islamabad and Kabul continue to exchange incendiary claims.

The former charges the Taliban regime with consorting with Pakistan's arch-rival, India, and working with New Delhi to provide support for the Pakistan Taliban, an Islamic fundamentalist insurgent group based in Pakistan's traditional, Pashtun-speaking, tribal areas. The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) emerged in the first decade of this century in response to the brutal methods that the Pakistani state and US imperialism employed in suppressing opposition, after the Afghan war—in which Islamabad was a key partner from the outset—spilled over into Pakistan.

The Taliban, meanwhile, accuses Pakistan of working with Washington to bully and undermine it, because of its refusal to entertain US President Trump's demand that it return to American control the massive Bagram Air Base that the US military built on Kabul's outskirts during its two-decade-long occupation of Afghanistan.

Trump has explicitly tied the airbase's return to US control to Washington's plans to wage war on China. "One of the reasons we want the base," said Trump last month, "is it's an hour away from where China makes its nuclear weapons."

Relations between the US and Pakistan have long been in a tailspin. However, they have improved markedly since Trump returned to the presidency last January. Trump has twice received Marshal Munir, Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff and the power behind the throne of its Muslim League (Nawaz)-led civilian government, at the White House. America's would-be dictator president has touted newly-negotiated rare earths and energy pacts with Pakistan. There are reports Islamabad has proposed US firms build an Arabian Sea port at Pasni, which lies approximately 75 kilometers or 47 miles east of Gwadar, a key hub of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

The military hostilities began on October 9, when Pakistan, in flagrant violation of international law, initiated a series of air raids on what they claimed were TTP bases located in or near Kabul, Khost, Jalalabad, and Paktika. Two days later, Afghanistan retaliated with attacks on dozens of Pakistani border posts, more than two dozen of which it claimed to have overrun. Cross-border fighting raged on October 12-13, with Pakistan claiming to have killed more than 200 Taliban and affiliated fighters and conceding the loss of 23 soldiers. Kabul for its part said its forces had killed more than 50 Pakistani troops. Cross-border fighting erupted anew on October 15 and continued for the next two days, while Pakistan mounted a fresh air attack on Paktika, in which 10 civilians, including children, were reportedly killed.

On Saturday, the 18th, the two sides agreed to a 48-hour ceasefire, which after further clashes was transformed into a permanent ceasefire in

talks in Doha. According to a Qatari Foreign Ministry statement, Kabul and Islamabad "agreed to an immediate ceasefire and the establishment of mechanisms to consolidate lasting peace and stability between the two countries."

The more than week-long military hostilities have further aggravated popular suffering in a region already marked by extreme poverty and hunger. For days, the Torkham and Chaman crossings—the main trade routes between the two countries—and other border points, have been closed, stranding thousands of trucks carrying food supplies and other goods between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The Pakistani-Afghan clash underscores the extent to which South Asia is being transformed into a geopolitical powder keg, as longstanding reactionary inter-state rivalries rooted in colonialism and the 1947 communal Partition of South Asia become inextricably enmeshed with the imperialist drive to repartition the world and great power rivalries.

For US imperialism, the region is central to its plans to strategically and militarily encircle China, including by dominating the Indian Ocean, through which the world's most important sea lanes and those most critical to China's economy traverse.

Pakistan carried out its first bombing raid on Afghanistan on the very day that Afghan Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi began a week-long visit to India. It was clearly intended to deliver a message to both New Delhi and Kabul.

To date only Russia has formally recognized the Taliban as Afghanistan's government. However, the visit marked a significant warming in Indo-Afghan ties, with India pledging to provide significant humanitarian assistance and health aid in a joint statement.

The statement signalled growing security cooperation between the two countries. India declared its appreciation of Kabul's condemnation of last April's Pahalgam terrorist attack in Indian-held Kashmir. New Delhi used the Pahalgam attack as the pretext for mounting a campaign of military strikes on Pakistan that led to a four-day border war, which brought the two nuclear-armed states to the brink of full-scale war.

For its part, the Taliban regime pledged not to "allow any group or individual to use the territory of Afghanistan against India." In a move which Islamabad took angry exception to, it also implicitly voiced its support for India's claim to Jammu and Kashmir, with its commitment to "respect" India's "sovereignty and territorial integrity."

India and Pakistan's competing claims to Indian-held Jammu and Kashmir (India's only Muslim-majority state or territory) and Azad or Pakistani-held Kashmir have long been the focal point of their reactionary strategic rivalry.

The Indian-Afghan rapprochement will further heighten Islamabad's fears, especially as India's Narendra Modi-led, Hindu supremacist BJP government has repeatedly declared that the war it unleashed against Pakistan last May, Operation Sindoor, is merely paused. In a move that threatens Pakistan's economy by potentially denying it the water it needs for irrigation and power-generation, New Delhi has also demonstratively

announced its withdrawal from the Indus Water Treaty.

Islamabad has for some time been accusing Afghanistan—with which it shares a 2,500-kilometre-long porous border—of harboring the TTP insurgents and plotting, with India, to use them as proxies to destabilize Pakistan. It is also accusing both Kabul and New Delhi of providing support to the Baloch ethno-nationalist separatist insurgency, which is led by the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA). The BLA has long sought to win Washington's support by emphasizing its hostility to China and the CPEC.

As it has traditionally done, Pakistan's military and capitalist elite have responded to the development of national-ethnic and communal cleavages, that are rooted in imperialist oppression, social inequality, military impunity and the systematic squelching of the democratic and social aspirations of the working class and oppressed masses, with extreme violence and repression. At the same time, like their capitalist rivals in India, the Pakistani establishment has whipped up communally-laced nationalism, complete with bellicose threats to wage war on its neighbour, as a means of diverting social anger and frustration along reactionary lines.

The Pakistani ruling class—and this dates back to the late 1970s, when its military served as the nexus of Washington's scheme to organize and arm Islamist opposition to Afghanistan's pro-Soviet regime—has long harboured the aim of dominating Afghanistan so as to use it to provide “strategic depth” in its rivalry with India.

During the last stages of the US occupation of Afghanistan, Islamabad maneuvered to accomplish this aim, seeking to broker a deal for a “transitional” government between the Taliban, the US puppet-regime in Kabul and Washington. But the scheme fell apart when support for the puppet regime evaporated in July-August 2021 amid a drawing down of US military forces.

Relations between Pakistan and the new Pashtun-dominated Taliban regime in Kabul quickly unraveled, as the latter balked at Islamabad's efforts to bully it, refused to recognize the British-imperialist-imposed Durand Line as the border between the two countries, and signaled its support for a Greater Pakhtunkhwa (Land of the Pashtuns), incorporating the Pashtun-majority areas of Pakistan.

Islamabad responded by moving to fence the entire border, cutting off families and communities from each other, and then launched a campaign to expel millions of Afghan refugees, many of whom had lived in Pakistan for decades and or were born there.

China has joined Iran, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and other states in the region in calling for de-escalation of the Pakistan-Afghan conflict. Beijing has long had an “all-weather friendship” with Pakistan, and is seeking to forge ties with Taliban-led Afghanistan, including by offering to make it part of its Belt and Road Initiative.

The next round of Pakistan-Afghan peace talks are to be held in Istanbul, Turkey, on Saturday. Nonetheless the situation remains highly explosive.

A key destabilizing factor is US imperialism's determination to exploit any opportunity to further its drive to thwart China's rise. Since the turn of the century, Washington has aggressively courted India, showering it with strategic favours and advanced weaponry with the aim of harnessing it to its military-strategic offensive against Beijing. Pakistan has issued ever shriller warnings that the US has altered the regional power dynamic, emboldening India, and leaving it no option to seek ever closer ties to China.

Now, however, New Delhi is angered, if not spooked, by the sudden warming of US-Pakistani ties. At 19 percent, Pakistan has the lowest US tariff rate of any South Asian country, while Trump has slapped 50 percent tariffs on most Indian exports, with the aim of compelling it to halt its purchases of cheap Russian oil and to massively downgrade its long-time strategic partnership with Moscow.

In a television interview this week, Pakistan's Defence Minister, Khawaja Muhammad Asif, fulminated against both India and Afghanistan: “It is premature to say how long the ceasefire between Pakistan and Afghanistan will last. Afghanistan has become a proxy for India. These attacks were launched during the Afghan Foreign Minister's visit to India, which India is sponsoring. At present, the TTP is a proxy for Kabul, and Kabul is a proxy for India. India is actually operating on both sides of Pakistan's borders at the moment.”

The decision of Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and his Muslim League government to shut down all Afghan refugee camps and deny any further extension of their stay is throwing further fuel on the fire. Prime Minister Sharif's directive for the “repatriation” of Afghan nationals includes the establishment of additional exit points along the border to expel the millions of remaining refugees. This policy will undoubtedly aggravate Afghanistan's already dire economic and social conditions, with many Afghans fearing being “returned” to not only poverty but persecution and repression by the Taliban regime.

The deportation of those legally-designated Afghan “nationals,” irrespective of the strength of their ties to Pakistan and the centuries-long interaction of the people on both sides of the Durand Line, will only serve to deepen hatred, anger, and divisions among the masses—divisions exploited by Islamic militants on one hand and Pakistan's venal capitalist elite on the other.

The only way forward—and the most urgent task—is to build an anti-war movement rooted in the working class and youth across the region, with the central objective of developing a broad anti-imperialist struggle. This struggle is inseparable from the overthrow of capitalism, the root cause of imperialist war, inequality, and oppression. It must be carried out in complete independence from all factions of the bourgeoisie and on the basis of the program of Permanent Revolution first elaborated by Leon Trotsky—aiming to replace moribund capitalism with the socialist reorganization of society. The reactionary state borders created by colonialism, imperialism, and the cowardly national bourgeoisie must be transcended through the unified revolutionary struggle of the toilers under the leadership of the working class and the establishment of the Socialist United States of South Asia.



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