

## SOUTH ASIA THIS WEEK

### The Most Consequential Developments Are the Least Reported

In South Asia, the developments most likely to shape the region's future are often the ones receiving the least international attention. While global media focuses on crises elsewhere, a volatile situation is unfolding between Pakistan and Afghanistan, with implications for regional security, minority protection, and great-power competition. Recent discussions within SADF highlighted several developments that remain largely absent from international headlines but deserve close scrutiny.



#### 1. Towards an “Open War” Between Pakistan and Afghanistan?

The conflict along the Pakistan–Afghanistan frontier continues to intensify.

Communities living along both sides of the border—particularly the Pashtuns—are experiencing frequent human-rights violations and growing insecurity as clashes between the two sides continue. Their communities are divided by the disputed, so-called Durand Line, a legacy of the British colonial era that separates Afghanistan and Pakistan. Islamabad's unilateral decision to fence this border in an attempt to prevent uncontrolled crossings has angered not only local communities but also the Afghan Taliban government.

Kabul's reluctance to act against Afghanistan-based cross-border militants—most notably the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)—as well as against armed groups pursuing a separatist agenda in Pakistan, particularly Baloch fighters, further exacerbates tensions.

These areas are extremely remote, and access for journalists or international observers is limited. As a result, violence and repression are occurring largely outside the international spotlight. Yet frontier regions often become incubators for militant networks, smuggling routes, and political radicalization. If instability continues to deepen, the borderlands between Pakistan and Afghanistan could once again become a major center of regional insurgency and transnational militancy, with consequences far beyond the immediate region.

***Why This Matters:***

- **Resurgence of militant networks:** Unstable border regions could become safe havens for transnational militant groups. This may increase terrorism risks across South Asia and beyond.
- **New migration pressures:** Escalating violence could displace large numbers of border communities. Such instability may eventually contribute to new migration flows toward Europe and neighboring regions.
- **Disruption of strategic trade corridors:** Continued conflict could threaten key infrastructure and connectivity projects linking South Asia to Central Asia and global markets. This would have wider implications for regional trade and energy routes.

## 2. China Quietly Steps Into the Conflict

Recent reporting indicates that China has stepped up diplomatic efforts to mediate between Afghanistan and Pakistan through a form of “shuttle diplomacy.” According to several newspaper reports, Beijing's special envoy for Afghan affairs has been traveling between Kabul and Islamabad to encourage dialogue and reduce tensions following border clashes and mutual accusations over militant activity.

Chinese officials have emphasized that the immediate priority is to prevent further escalation and bring both sides back to negotiations while maintaining communication with leaders in both capitals.

This development is geopolitically significant. If Beijing becomes a key mediator in the Afghanistan–Pakistan conflict, it would signal a major shift in regional diplomacy, with China expanding its influence in South Asian security affairs.

Such a shift could reshape power dynamics in the region, especially as traditional Western engagement in Afghanistan has declined since the Taliban's return to power.

And indeed China's diplomatic engagement appears to have contributed to a temporary reduction in fighting along the Afghanistan–Pakistan border, highlighting China's growing role as a regional mediator and its interest in stabilizing an area crucial for major international development projects linked to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), particularly the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

However, hostility between Pakistan and Afghanistan is deeply rooted, and it is therefore not surprising that fighting continues despite China's considerable influence over both parties.

***Why This Matters:***

- **China's expanding diplomatic role:** Beijing's mediation efforts position China as a key diplomatic actor and could gradually shift regional influence away from traditional Western actors.
- **Strategic protection of infrastructure projects:** China has strong incentives to stabilize the region due to the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Continued instability could threaten these critical economic corridors.
- **Limits of external mediation:** Despite China's influence over both Kabul and Islamabad, deep-rooted tensions continue to fuel clashes. This highlights how entrenched regional conflicts can resist even powerful diplomatic intervention.

### 3. Balochistan: An Unresolved Flashpoint

At the same time, Balochistan remains a persistent source of instability within Pakistan.

Violence and unrest continue to erupt in the province, with the situation described during the meeting as periodically “exploding” without sustained international attention.

The relative silence surrounding Balochistan is striking given its strategic importance. The region sits at the crossroads of energy corridors, infrastructure routes, and maritime access to the Arabian Sea.

If unrest escalates further, it could threaten critical regional infrastructure and deepen internal instability within Pakistan—particularly as the country already faces mounting pressures along the Afghan frontier.

***Why This Matters:***

- **Growing regional instability:** Persistent unrest in Balochistan could deepen Pakistan's internal security crisis. This would add pressure to an already fragile situation along the Afghanistan border.
- **Threat to strategic energy and trade routes:** Balochistan sits at the crossroads of key infrastructure and energy corridors linking South Asia to global markets. Escalating violence could disrupt critical transport and maritime access to the Arabian Sea.
- **Risks to major international investments:** Instability threatens large-scale infrastructure projects connected to regional connectivity initiatives. Attacks on such projects could undermine economic development and foreign investment in the region.

## 4. Pakistan's Strategic Dilemma

These overlapping crises place Pakistan in an increasingly difficult strategic position.

Islamabad faces several simultaneous challenges:

- conflict along the Afghan border
- persistent insurgency in Balochistan
- fragile internal security conditions
- growing geopolitical pressures involving regional and global actors

The risk is that these dynamics could reinforce one another. A prolonged border conflict, combined with internal unrest and external pressure, could weaken Pakistan's ability to stabilize its frontier regions.

### ***Why This Matters***

- **Strategic overstretch:** Pakistan faces simultaneous pressures from border conflict, internal insurgencies, and geopolitical competition. This risks stretching state capacity and security resources.
- **Escalation risks:** Instability along the Afghan frontier combined with unrest in Balochistan could reinforce each other.
- **Regional spillover effects:** Prolonged instability in Pakistan could affect neighboring countries and regional security dynamics. Such developments would have implications far beyond South Asia.

## 5. Why All Of This Matters

What is happening between Pakistan and Afghanistan may appear peripheral in global news cycles, but the implications are far from marginal.

The borderlands between these two countries have historically been one of the world's most consequential geopolitical fault lines—shaping conflicts involving terrorism, great-power rivalry, and regional instability for decades.

If current trends continue, the region could once again become a focal point of instability with global repercussions.

For observers of South Asia, the lesson is clear:

**The developments most likely to shape the region's future are often the ones least reported.**

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Disclaimer: This text was created with the help of SADF's Custom Chat GPT. It encapsulates the conclusions from internal SADF meetings.