SITUATIONAL REPORTS

Pakistan’s Drone War Crosses the Durand Line as Islamabad Strikes 10 Sites in Afghanistan

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EXECUTIVE BRIEF & KEY FINDINGS

Pakistan has opened another round of cross-border strikes against Afghanistan, but the latest exchange is qualitatively different from the familiar pattern of Pakistani air raids against alleged militant sanctuaries. Islamabad says the operation conducted overnight on 23 and 24 September targeted ten locations used to launch and store drones after unmanned aircraft entered Pakistani airspace from Afghanistan a day earlier. The Taliban government denies launching the drones. What is emerging is therefore not simply another episode in the Pakistan–Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan confrontation. It is an increasingly direct contest between Pakistan and Afghanistan in which unmanned systems are becoming a principal instrument of retaliation, signalling and escalation.[1]

The latest exchange

Pakistan’s Information Minister Attaullah Tarar said Pakistani air-defence systems detected, tracked and neutralised drones launched from Afghan territory on 23 September before they reached their intended targets. Pakistani media, citing security sources, reported that eight drones were intercepted, four near the Torkham border and four in mountainous areas close to Kohat. Islamabad responded with what Tarar described as “precision aerial and drone strikes” against ten locations in Afghanistan that Pakistan says were directly connected to the launching and storage of

the aircraft.[2]

The Afghan account differs substantially. Taliban officials told Reuters that their government had not launched drones against Pakistan. Afghan officials nevertheless confirmed Pakistani strikes in Khost and Paktia provinces and said there were no casualties in those attacks. Separately, a Kandahar resident told AFP that a jet was heard over the city before a large explosion and fire in central Kandahar. Pakistan has not publicly released a complete list of the ten targets, and the reported Kandahar strike has not yet been independently linked to a specific military objective.[3]

This uncertainty is important. As of 24 September, Pakistan's assertion that Wednesday's drones were launched by the Afghan Taliban remains disputed by Kabul, while publicly available reporting does not establish the origin, type, payload or intended targets of all the drones. The ten Pakistani target locations have similarly not been independently verified.

What can be established is the rapidly accelerating sequence of actions and counter-actions. On 18 September, militants struck a police compound in Kohat during Friday prayers. Reuters reported at least 24 deaths in the attack, which involved a vehicle bomb followed by an armed assault. Shura Ittehad-ul-Mujahideen, an armed coalition headed by Hafiz Gul Bahadur, subsequently claimed responsibility.?

Three days later, Pakistan struck targets in Afghanistan's Kunar and Paktika provinces. Islamabad claimed that 28 militants and suicide bombers were killed. Afghan authorities said civilians were among the victims, and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan confirmed the deaths of a man, a woman and a girl in Kunar. Kabul summoned Pakistan's chargé d'affaires and warned that it would respond.? The alleged Afghan drone incursion of 23 September and Pakistan's ten-site retaliation the following night therefore represent the next stage of the same escalation cycle.

This is no longer only a counter-TTP campaign

Pakistan has long justified operations inside Afghanistan by arguing that the Taliban government either cannot or will not prevent anti-Pakistan militants from using Afghan territory. Kabul rejects the accusation and maintains that Pakistan's militancy problem is principally an internal security issue.

The present confrontation, however, increasingly exceeds this original framework. Pakistan is not merely striking alleged TTP hideouts while dealing diplomatically with Kabul. Pakistani and Afghan government forces are now themselves employing artillery, drones and air power against one another. Afghanistan carried out drone attacks against Pakistan during earlier fighting this year, including operations in February and March and another round following Pakistani strikes in June. Reuters reported this week that Pakistan had already accused Afghanistan of launching drones into its territory in July.

ACLED's assessment of the June escalation is particularly revealing. It found that the Afghan Taliban responded to Pakistani operations with drone strikes against locations in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. ACLED assessed that remote warfare had become the dominant mechanism through which the two sides could retaliate without immediately returning to large-scale ground combat.? The 24 September strikes therefore should not be interpreted as the beginning of an Afghanistan–Pakistan drone confrontation. They indicate its consolidation.

Afghanistan is using drones to compensate for weakness in the air

The military imbalance between the two states explains much of this emerging pattern. Pakistan possesses combat aircraft, armed UAVs, precision-guided weapons and a substantially more developed air-defence network. Afghanistan lacks a comparable conventional air force. For Kabul, attempting to contest Pakistani air power symmetrically would be unrealistic.

Unmanned systems change part of that equation. During the fighting earlier this year, the Taliban demonstrated commercially derived UAVs and locally produced loitering munitions. Janes reported that Afghanistan had employed UAVs for surveillance as well as one-way attack missions and displayed a fixed-wing V-tail loitering munition whose estimated range could reach several hundred kilometres. The exact performance of these systems remains difficult to independently assess.?

The operational logic is nevertheless clear. A relatively inexpensive unmanned aircraft does not need to defeat the Pakistan Air Force in conventional air combat to have strategic effect. It only needs to penetrate sufficiently far into Pakistani territory to compel interception, trigger airspace restrictions, threaten military installations or demonstrate vulnerability.

That happened during the March fighting. Taliban-associated drone operations were reported around Quetta, Kohat and Rawalpindi. Pakistan characterised the aircraft as rudimentary and locally produced, but the geographic reach was itself significant. Rawalpindi houses Pakistan's military headquarters and lies beside Islamabad. Even unsuccessful drone attacks against such locations create a political and military signalling effect disproportionate to the cost of the aircraft.? This is the asymmetry Kabul appears increasingly willing to exploit.

Pakistan faces two overlapping drone problems

The more difficult challenge for Islamabad is that the Afghan state is only one component of the problem. Pakistan is simultaneously confronting the diffusion of weaponised commercial drones among militant organisations operating in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. TTP and other armed groups have adapted inexpensive quadcopters for reconnaissance and explosive delivery. Pakistan's military acknowledged earlier this year that hundreds of militant incidents in 2025 involved quadcopters. The TTP formally announced an “Air Force” unit in December 2025, although militant drone use preceded that announcement.

This creates a difficult attribution environment. A drone crossing from Afghan territory does not automatically establish whether it was operated directly by Afghan government forces, by TTP or allied militants based in Afghanistan, or by another actor. The distinction matters strategically because Pakistan's response options differ significantly depending upon who actually conducted an attack.

Islamabad's current position eliminates much of that distinction by holding the Taliban authorities responsible for hostile activity originating from Afghan territory. Tarar said Pakistan would not tolerate attacks conducted either by militant organisations or by the Afghan Taliban itself. That amounts to a broader deterrence formulation. Kabul is increasingly being treated not simply as a government expected to suppress anti-Pakistan militants, but as an actor that Pakistan may directly strike when threats originate from territory under Taliban control.

The escalation ladder is becoming shorter

There is another important change. Earlier Pakistan–Afghanistan crises generally moved through a recognisable sequence. A major militant attack inside Pakistan was followed by allegations concerning Afghan safe havens, diplomatic pressure and occasionally a Pakistani cross-border strike.

That sequence is compressing. The Kohat attack occurred on 18 September. Pakistani strikes followed on 21 September. An alleged Afghan drone incursion followed on 23 September. Pakistan retaliated against ten reported locations within hours.

An escalation cycle that once developed over weeks can now unfold across several days. Drones contribute directly to this compression because they provide both sides with a relatively rapid method of retaliation. They require fewer

preparations than major ground operations and may appear politically easier to calibrate than conventional escalation. Yet that apparent controllability carries its own danger. Repeated limited strikes can normalise the use of force until one operation produces casualties or damage sufficiently serious to demand a larger response.

The importance of Kandahar should therefore be watched closely. If independently confirmed as part of the current Pakistani operation, a strike in the Taliban's southern political heartland would carry a different signalling value from operations against suspected militant facilities immediately adjacent to the border. At present, however, Pakistan has not confirmed that Kandahar was among its ten targets.

What India should watch

For India, the most important development is not whether eight drones were intercepted or precisely how many of Pakistan's ten targets were destroyed. It is the accelerating military adaptation occurring on both sides of the Durand Line.

Pakistan is accumulating combat experience in integrating intelligence, air power, armed UAVs, artillery and counter-UAS systems against both state and non-state threats. Afghanistan, despite profound conventional limitations, is demonstrating how inexpensive unmanned systems can impose air-defence and political costs on a conventionally superior opponent.

At the same time, the drone ecosystem developing along the Afghanistan–Pakistan frontier cannot be separated neatly into state and militant compartments. Technical knowledge, commercially available platforms, components and battlefield adaptations can diffuse between organisations faster than conventional weapons systems.

That makes developments within TTP's unmanned capability particularly relevant. The issue for India is less whether an Afghan Taliban drone itself represents a direct threat and more whether the broader regional diffusion of long-range one-way attack systems, modified commercial quadcopters and tactical UAV expertise increases the capabilities available to Pakistan-based and Afghanistan-linked militant networks.

> ***Assessment***
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> *The 24 September strikes mark another step in the transformation of Pakistan–Afghanistan hostility from a dispute centred on militant sanctuaries into a recurring system of direct remote warfare.*
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> *Pakistan retains overwhelming conventional superiority in the air. Afghanistan nevertheless possesses an increasingly accessible means of imposing costs through drones, while militant groups operating across the same battlespace are simultaneously developing similar capabilities. This creates a conflict environment in which attribution becomes harder even as retaliation becomes faster.*
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> *Neither side presently appears to be mobilising for sustained conventional ground war, and Pakistan says its latest strikes were calibrated and confined to identified military objectives. Kabul denies responsibility for the alleged drone attacks. Those caveats matter. The available evidence does not establish that a broader war is imminent.*
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> *The more consequential trend is already visible. Airstrikes are becoming routine. Drone retaliation is becoming repeatable. The geographic depth of unmanned operations has increased. The interval between action and counter-action is narrowing.*
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> *The Durand Line is therefore no longer merely a contested frontier through which militants move. It is increasingly becoming a laboratory for asymmetric air warfare between two neighbouring states and the armed groups operating*

> *in the space between them.*

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