Neither Islamabad nor Kabul: A Left Perspective on the Pakistan–Afghanistan War

written by Farooq Sulehria | March 4, 2026

In this conversation with *Alternative Viewpoint*, Pakistani left activist, academic and journalist Farooq Sulehria examines the crisis.

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As cross-border strikes intensify and Pakistan's defence minister declares "open war" against the Afghan Taliban government, the long arc of Islamabad's Afghanistan policy appears under severe strain. Is this merely another episode in a volatile frontier relationship — or the blowback of decades of militarised strategy and proxy politics?

In this conversation with *Alternative Viewpoint*, Pakistani left activist, academic and journalist Farooq Sulehria examines the crisis through a structural lens: the legacy of "strategic depth," the Frankenstein logic of jihadist patronage, the ideological character of the Taliban regime, and the dangers of campism within sections of the left. Rejecting both state militarism and theocratic authoritarianism, Sulehria argues that the current confrontation reflects a deeper crisis of the regional order — one whose costs will be borne overwhelmingly by working people on both sides of the Durand Line.

Alternative Viewpoint: Pakistan's Defence Minister has declared an "open war" against the Afghan Taliban government. Is this escalation a tactical rupture, or does it mark the exhaustion of Pakistan's long-standing Afghanistan doctrine?

Farooq Sulehria : It is neither a tactical rupture nor the exhaustion of the strategic depth doctrine. The declaration reflects Islamabad's mounting frustration over an ongoing conflict. A declaration of war is not made lightly; preparations would have preceded it. Only after exhausting other avenues did Pakistan designate the very Taliban regime it once helped bring to power as an adversary. Ironically, Defence Minister Khawaja Asif himself had expressed gratitude when the Taliban defeated the United States and regained control of Kabul.

Border clashes have escalated since last October into Pakistani attacks on Kabul and other towns. Qatar, Turkey and China reportedly facilitated 65 rounds of talks between Kabul and Islamabad — all without resolving the TTP question. Meanwhile, Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has intensified its attacks inside Pakistan, operating from sanctuaries in Afghanistan. Nearly 1,000 terror attacks were reported last year, most attributed to the TTP.

Since October, Pakistan has closed its border and halted trade with Afghanistan. As a landlocked country, Afghanistan depends heavily on Pakistan for transit trade, including access to India, and for essential imports such as wheat, vegetables and medicines.

Simultaneously, nationalist militancy has intensified in Pakistan's Balochistan province. Islamabad accuses India of backing Baloch separatists. The Taliban regime, in turn, has cultivated ties with New Delhi — much to Islamabad's frustration — partly to counter Pakistani pressure.

For decades, Pakistan justified providing safe havens to the Afghan Taliban under the doctrine of

“strategic depth” — the idea that Afghanistan would serve as a “friendly backyard” in the event of conflict with a much larger India. That logic continues to shape Islamabad’s thinking.

AV: The concept of “strategic depth” has influenced Islamabad’s policy for decades. Has this doctrine now collapsed, and if so, what might take its place?

FS: On the contrary, it appears far from collapsed. Commentators close to the establishment have floated the idea of regime change in Kabul. Whether Islamabad is actively pursuing such a course is difficult to substantiate, but such thinking cannot be ruled out. Pakistan has historically explored coups and political engineering in Afghanistan.

Such ideas may be unrealistic and even self-defeating. Yet they reveal the persistence — even obsession — with strategic depth. The current escalation reflects Islamabad’s desperation to rein in a Taliban regime that no longer behaves as a compliant proxy.

AV: Islamabad portrays the crisis as being centred on TTP sanctuaries in Afghanistan. To what degree is this conflict a result of Pakistan’s historical engagement in proxy warfare and its support for militant groups?

FS: This is a classic case of Frankenstein’s monster — or the sorcerer’s apprentice. Pakistan has long been both the origin and a breeding ground for Islamic fundamentalism. Since the so-called “Afghan Jihad” — derisively called “Dollar Jihad” by critics — the state fostered what can only be described as a jihad industry.

Initially, this infrastructure was directed against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan; later it was turned toward India. The classification of some militants as “good Taliban” and others as “bad Taliban” indicates that the underlying policy logic has remained intact.

AV: At the same time, how should we assess the Taliban regime’s responsibility? Has Kabul failed—or refused— to restrain cross-border militancy for ideological or strategic reasons?

FS: The Afghan regime appears to have done little to rein in the TTP. Some argue that it lacks the capacity to fully control the group. There are ideological affinities, practical constraints and geopolitical calculations at play. The Taliban have also used the TTP card strategically — including to signal autonomy from Pakistan and to cultivate ties with other regional actors, including India.

AV: Should the current confrontation be viewed primarily as a clash between two regimes driven by security concerns, both influenced by decades of conflict, rather than merely as a straightforward instance of aggression and retaliation?

FS: It is a clash of barbarisms. Neither side can claim moral superiority. The Taliban regime has institutionalised what amounts to gender apartheid and rules through fear and intimidation. Its social base is limited, relying heavily on extremist religious constituencies.

At the same time, Pakistan’s military establishment governs through a securitised worldview, framing every issue as a matter of national security. Diplomatic space shrinks when both regimes privilege coercion over politics.

In this tragic scenario, civilians pay the price. Afghans have endured hellish conditions since 1979. People in Pakistan — particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa — have suffered immensely since 9/11, caught between Taliban violence, state military operations and spiralling sectarian conflict. Western imperial interventions — from the Cold War to the War on Terror — laid the foundations for this catastrophe, but regional actors have since entrenched it.

AV: Since returning to power in 2021, the Taliban have struggled with economic collapse, diplomatic isolation, and internal factional tensions. How do these pressures shape their stance toward Pakistan?

FS: Soon after consolidating control, the Taliban signalled distance from Pakistan. They recognised that Islamabad lacked the economic and diplomatic leverage to guarantee legitimacy. Instead, they pursued ties with China, Russia, Turkey, the Gulf states — and, to Pakistan's irritation, India.

Anti-Pakistan rhetoric from Taliban officials also plays well domestically, where Pakistan is deeply unpopular. Such posturing helps consolidate their internal legitimacy.

AV: From a left perspective, how should one characterise the Taliban regime today?

FS: There has been a tendency among some to portray the Taliban as Islamo-nationalists. Tariq Ali's book *The Forty-Year War in Afghanistan* reflects this interpretation. I disagree. The Taliban represent one of the most extreme forms of Islamic fundamentalism.

Nationalism emphasises language, culture and shared historical identity. Islamic fundamentalism, by contrast, subordinates such categories to a transnational religious order governed by Sharia. Culture is often denounced as impurity; music and dance become sinful.

Some even framed the Taliban as an expression of class struggle. These misreadings were early signs of campism after 9/11 — where opposition to Western imperialism led some to romanticise reactionary forces.

AV: The Taliban claims it is defending Afghan sovereignty. How can one engage that claim critically?

FS: Pakistan frames TTP sanctuaries as violations of sovereignty; the Taliban frames air strikes as violations of sovereignty. Each invokes legality when convenient. It is a clash of barbarisms.

One may sympathise with Frankenstein or with his monster, but the outcome is devastation. The real victims are civilians on both sides of the Durand Line.

AV: Regional powers — China, Iran, Russia, and Gulf states — have moved quickly to call for de-escalation. What does this episode reveal about the fragility of the wider regional order?

FS: A couple of days after Pakistan's declaration of war, the US-Israel attack on Iran and the ensuing situation have overshadowed the Pak-Afghan conflict. This conflict is not only regional, but it also underscores the growing number of nation-state wars. United Nations has become increasingly marginal. No matter how hypocritical and problematic the global liberal order was, the Trumpist alternative is proving even more dangerous. Incidentally, Trump has praised the Pakistani attack on Afghanistan.

AV: Both countries face severe economic crises. How does militarised escalation intersect with class realities?

FS: As always, the working classes will bear the burden — through displacement, unemployment, militarisation and deepening austerity. The continuing conflict in West Asia will exacerbate their suffering.

AV: In a conflict between a militarised postcolonial state and a theocratic regime, what

principle should the left adopt? How can it oppose both militarism and religious authoritarianism without sliding into geopolitical campism?

FS: Pakistan cannot defeat the Taliban without adopting a genuinely secular orientation. That is fundamental. The Taliban regime should not be recognised, and solidarity must be extended to the Afghan people — especially women facing institutionalised apartheid.

The left must not align with either Islamabad or Kabul. We oppose the war and demand justice, democracy and accountability. We must hold both the Taliban and their regional or imperial backers responsible for war crimes.

It is disturbing to see even some self-described leftists supporting military escalation in the name of opposing fundamentalism. This reflects what I call "internal Orientalism" — a chauvinistic framing of the conflict as a civilisational struggle.

AV: Does this crisis create an opening to rethink security-state politics across the region — and is there any realistic space today for cross-border progressive solidarity between Pakistani and Afghan civil society forces?

FS: Rather than limiting ourselves to AfPak solidarity, we need a broader South Asia-wide project. Inside Afghanistan, civil society faces severe repression, so diaspora networks become crucial. In Pakistan too, progressive voices are marginalised.

Yet such a project is urgently needed. Our newspaper, *Daily Jeddojehad (Struggle)*, will take modest initial steps in this direction. Only by building regional solidarity can we challenge both militarism and fundamentalism.

Original Source: Alternative Viewpoint

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