

# US backs Pakistan's 'right to defend itself' after strikes on Afghanistan

[AFP](#) :: Pakistan air strikes on Afghanistan drew diplomatic support from Washington as Islamabad said on Saturday it would not stop military operations pressuring the Afghan government, which it accuses of backing militancy.

The Taliban government has denied harbouring militants and its spokesperson has called for "dialogue" to resolve a previously simmering conflict that Pakistan's defence minister said on Friday was now "open war".

After both countries' forces clashed at the border intermittently for months, Pakistan launched the strikes in the early hours of Friday morning in response to a cross-border Afghan offensive on Thursday night.

Pakistan's information minister said on Saturday that 37 locations across Afghanistan had been subject to aerial targeting since its operation began.

It was not clear if strikes had taken place on Friday night, but authorities signaled operations were still taking place.

"Pakistan's immediate and effective response to aggression continues," Mosharraf Zaidi, a spokesman for Pakistan's prime minister, posted on X late on Friday.

The United States "expressed support for Pakistan's right to defend itself against Taliban attacks," Allison Hooker, the under secretary of state for political affairs, wrote on X after talks with her Pakistani counterpart.

The operation was Pakistan's most widespread bombardment of the Afghan capital Kabul and its first air strikes on the city of Kandahar, the southern power base of the Taliban's supreme

leader since they returned to power in 2021.

Zaidi did not confirm whether Pakistan had carried out air strikes overnight between Friday and Saturday.

– Surge in hostilities –

The sharp surge in hostilities drew international concern, with China, Britain, the United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross calling for immediate de-escalation and return to dialogue.

Taliban government spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said on Friday Afghan forces had killed 55 Pakistani soldiers and captured several others, while putting the death toll among Afghan troops at 13.

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Zaidi, the Pakistan government spokesman, said 297 Afghan Taliban and militants had been killed. Islamabad earlier said 12 of its soldiers had been killed.

The Afghan government's deputy spokesman Hamdullah Fitrat said at least 19 civilians had been killed in eastern Khost and Paktika provinces.

Casualty claims from both sides are difficult to verify independently.

This week's escalation marked the first time in on-off fighting that Pakistan had focused its air strikes on Afghan government facilities, analysts noted, a stark change from previous operations it had carried out on Afghan territory that it said were targeting militants.

Relations between the neighbours have plunged in recent months, with land border crossings largely shut since deadly fighting in October that killed more than 70 people on both sides.

Islamabad accuses Afghanistan of failing to act against militant groups that carry out attacks in Pakistan, which the Taliban government denies.

Most of the attacks have been claimed by the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a militant group that has stepped up assaults in Pakistan since 2021.

Zaidi told AFP on Saturday that there had been no reports of border clashes during the night, but that gunmen – who he said were associated with the Pakistani Taliban – had attacked a checkpoint in northwest Pakistan near Afghanistan's Khost province. No group immediately claimed responsibility for the attack.

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– Push for negotiations –

Iran, which shares an eastern border with Afghanistan and Pakistan, offered on Friday to help “facilitate dialogue”, while Saudi Arabia and Qatar moved to allay tensions, and China said it was “working with” both countries while calling for calm.

In Geneva, ICRC president Mirjana Spoljaric said the organisation was preparing relief operations but stressed that “no humanitarian response can compensate for political will to respect the rules of war and prioritise de-escalation”.

Last year, several rounds of negotiations between Pakistan and Afghanistan followed a ceasefire brokered by Qatar and Turkey, but the efforts have failed to produce a lasting agreement.

After repeated breaches of the initial truce, Saudi Arabia intervened this month, mediating the release of three Pakistani soldiers captured by Afghanistan in October.

Just days later, Pakistan carried out strikes in eastern Nangarhar and Paktika provinces, which the UN mission in

Afghanistan said killed at least 13 civilians.

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