



MONTHLY REGIONAL UPDATES **UPDATE**

Asia-Pacific Overview: March 2026

Rising militancy between Afghanistan and Pakistan once again triggered hostilities, resistance infighting in Myanmar turned deadly, and the war in Iran has threatened wider domestic instability in Pakistan.

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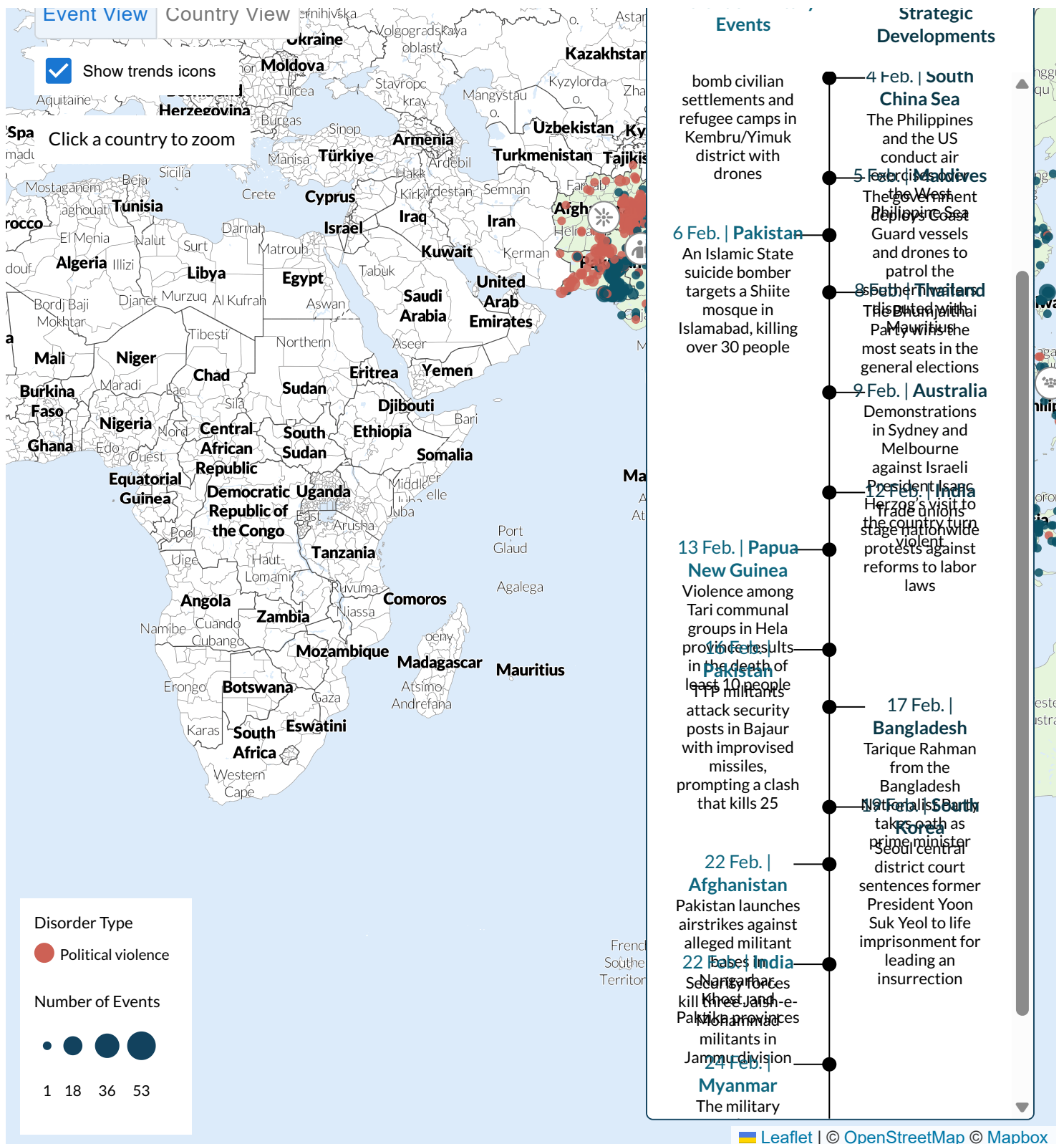
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Afghanistan and Pakistan: Rising militancy once again triggers hostilities

Over the weekend of 21 February, Pakistan targeted suspected militant hideouts in Afghanistan's border provinces with airstrikes. Afghanistan formally retaliated

by attacking Pakistani border posts on 26 February, engulfing the disputed Durand Line in clashes, which have continued alongside Pakistan's airstrikes deeper within Afghanistan.

According to ACLED data, this is the most intense fighting between the two countries since the Taliban's takeover in August 2021, surpassing [October 2025's brief conflict](#). In February, Pakistan launched a barrage of air- and drone strikes hitting at least eight Afghan provinces – the highest number recorded in a single month by ACLED since August 2021. While Pakistan's airstrikes last October mainly struck militant bases, this round – with the exception of the initial strikes over 21 and 22 February – has focused almost entirely on Taliban military bases and ammunition depots. Such strikes limit the Taliban's ability to respond at the border, but beyond that, they may also serve to limit future militant activities. Pakistan has previously accused the Afghan Taliban of failing to adequately secure its armories, claiming that weapons left behind after the NATO withdrawal have reached militant hands and contributed to their resurgence.¹

Islamist militant groups, including the [Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan \(TTP\)](#), have directed their fighters to intensify efforts in support of the Afghan Taliban since hostilities escalated, highlighting the centrality of their actions to the broader standoff.² The latest missive comes amid a surge in militancy – during the first two months of 2026, ACLED records more TTP attacks and clashes with security forces than in the first two months of last year, one of the most violent years in Pakistan in over a decade.

In February, fighting between Afghanistan and Pakistan reached its highest levels since the Taliban’s takeover in August 2021



Pakistan steps up pressure on the Afghan Taliban to crack down on militants – South Asia Senior Analyst Pearl Pandya

Rising militancy lies at the heart of the conflict between Afghanistan and Pakistan, as [Islamabad accuses Afghanistan of harboring militant groups that carry out attacks in its territory](#). Deadly militant attacks by the TTP and [Islamic State](#) in February once again triggered hostilities.³

After over a week of fighting, the Taliban appears willing to negotiate.⁴ There is, however, limited appetite from Pakistan, whose defense minister claimed that their patience had “run out,”⁵ and whose overwhelming military superiority gives it the upper hand. Pakistan’s response has gone further than the last outbreak of fighting in October, escalating pressure through sustained airstrikes on Taliban military bases and ammunition depots. In early March, it destroyed infrastructure at Bagram airbase outside Kabul and the Taliban al-Badr Corps’ headquarters in Kandahar city – the most high-profile targets

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to date — and there is still room for further escalation short of a ground incursion. This could include direct attacks on the broader government apparatus, especially in the Taliban's spiritual center, Kandahar city, or on specific government figures.

At the same time, Afghanistan is no stranger to battling a far more powerful military adversary. Its decades of experience in waging a guerrilla insurgency could allow it to respond with more unconventional tactics, such as increasing support for anti-Pakistan militant groups. This would be a protracted process, but it would place Pakistan's security forces under ever-increasing pressure.

Several countries have reportedly tried to mediate, but capacity is limited given [the escalating crisis in the Middle East](#).⁶ Even if reached, any ceasefire, however, would remain fragile as long as the TTP continues to threaten Pakistan's internal stability. It is unlikely that the latest escalation will push the Afghan Taliban to act decisively against the TTP, and even if it does, it may not be enough to curtail the group's activities. Focusing on Afghanistan allows Pakistan to sidestep scrutiny from its [own failings when it comes to controlling militancy](#).

See more of ACLED's coverage on [Afghanistan](#) and [Pakistan](#).

Myanmar: Resistance infighting turns deadly

Resistance infighting has gradually increased in recent months, resulting in February being the most lethal month for clashes between anti-coup resistance groups since the 2021 coup. On 17 February, People's Defense Forces aligned with the parallel National Unity Government (NUG-PDFs) clashed with the Burma National Resistance Army (BNRA), a local resistance group operating in Pale township of the Sagaing region. The fighting left 10 BNRA members dead and involved hundreds of NUG-PDF fighters, drones, and artillery — an unprecedented use of force for a clash between anti-coup resistance groups. The

military also hit the area with airstrikes once the fighting started. The BNRA, which had long fought the military, was dismantled following the clash. Its leader and four followers defected to the military, and around 100 members joined the NUG.⁷

The escalation followed several confrontations between the NUG-PDFs and BNRA, including both overrunning each other's security checkpoints in Pale township for some time. The NUG justified its military action by saying the BNRA ignored NUG directives and interfered with its administration.⁸ The NUG is currently trying to consolidate authority and formalize governance structures, particularly in central Myanmar, where many armed groups tax businesses and passers-by.⁹

ACLED records 11 cases of infighting in 2026 already, compared to six in the same time period of 2025, largely driven by rivalries and competition for support and resources. However, the NUG-PDF's offensive against the BNRA is the first major military operation by the NUG against another post-2021 resistance group and establishes a norm that could complicate further cooperation with other local resistance forces going forward.

Pakistan: A crisis at its doorstep in Iran threatens wider domestic instability

With the outbreak of [war between Iran and the United States and Israel on 28 February](#), Pakistan finds itself at the brink of an escalating regional conflict. Its recently signed mutual defense pact with Saudi Arabia raises the prospect that Iranian strikes in the Gulf could directly draw Pakistan into the fray. Meanwhile, Islamabad has urged Tehran to moderate its attacks on Saudi territory.¹⁰

Closer to home, the conflict has brought with it a series of threats to Pakistan's internal security. Most acutely, it has raised concerns of worsening militancy in the restive Balochistan province, which borders Iran and is the site of a decades-long separatist insurgency. More widely, it could heighten sectarian tensions between the country's minority Shiite and majority Sunni populations.

Balochistan lies at the intersection of Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan, with separatist Baloch groups active across these borders, though mainly in Pakistan and Iran. The region is difficult to govern at the best of times: Its vast terrain and

weak infrastructure compound security challenges. In this context, any instability within Iran could create openings for militant movement and arms smuggling across the border into Pakistan, further destabilizing an [already worsening security environment](#). Should the US-Israeli coalition pursue a peripheral destabilization strategy involving the Baloch Sunni militant groups, Pakistan would also be wary of Iranian retaliation in Balochistan. Tehran has long accused Islamabad of failing to adequately crack down on some of these groups, and in January 2024, it carried out airstrikes targeting suspected Jaish al-Adl hideouts across the border in Pakistan.

At the end of January, the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) launched phase two of [Operation Herof](#), carrying out attacks and suicide bombings across the province and seizing control of Nushki city. This was one of its most audacious offensives to date. Security forces dealt with the fallout in February, launching retaliatory operations between 1 and 4 February, which reportedly killed over 70 militants. Despite this onslaught, BLA militants maintained their hold on Nushki city for five days. The increasing sophistication of BLA attacks — moving beyond their usual hit-and-run modus operandi — underscores their growing capabilities.

Away from the border with Iran, the killing of Iranian leader Ali Khamenei triggered deadly demonstrations across Pakistan on 1 March, with dozens of people reportedly killed in clashes with security personnel.¹¹ Most fatalities occurred in the Shia-majority Gilgit-Baltistan region and in Karachi city, where US Marines opened fire after pro-Iran protesters breached the American consulate.¹² These protests are unlikely to die down soon. Pakistan is also home to one of the largest Shiite populations outside of Iran, and its well-organized religious and political groups have a history of mobilizing in response to global events affecting the Islamic world. Reports of US troops forcibly intervening in Pakistan will only inflame tensions.

It is a volatile environment, and although support for Iran likely crosses sectarian divides, any perception of a crackdown on Shiite protesters could deepen existing fissures. This is a dangerous mix in a country where sectarian tensions have often spilled over into violence, with armed groups present on both sides. Large gatherings of Shiite protesters also present a clear target for Sunni militant groups, such as the Islamic State, which recently carried out a suicide bombing on a Shiite mosque in Islamabad and has actively [stoked sectarian tensions](#). While

Baloch separatism may remain concentrated in the peripheries, sectarian strife would impact the entire country.

See more of ACLED's coverage on [Pakistan](#) and the [live Iran crisis hub](#) for daily updates on the conflict unfolding in Iran and the wider region.

Philippines: Duterte's ICC hearing is at the center of divided anti-corruption protests

A new wave of anti-corruption protests swept the Philippines in the last week of February. It coincided with both the 40th anniversary of the 1986 People Power Revolution and [former President Rodrigo Duterte's pre-trial confirmation of charges hearing at the International Criminal Court \(ICC\) in The Hague](#). The protests were led by two competing opposition blocs, united by an anti-Duterte stance but divided on their stance toward President Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos, Jr. — the Dutertes' ally-turned-foe.¹³

While the commemorative protests, held around Manila and some other large cities such as Bacolod, Iloilo, and Davao, continued to demand accountability over the corruption scandals that rocked the country in 2025, demonstrators — including the families of victims — also demanded justice over Duterte's war on drugs.¹⁴ Pro-Duterte groups also demonstrated in the country, while rival pro- and anti-Duterte protests were held at The Hague.¹⁵

The main demonstrations took place on 25 February along Quezon City's Epifanio de los Santos Avenue (EDSA) — the epicenter of the 1986 revolution that toppled the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos, Sr., the current president's father.¹⁶ Two demonstrations, less than a kilometer apart, were separately led by a center-left and liberal alliance and a radical left alliance. The center-left and liberal alliance, which has criticized Marcos, Jr. over corruption scandals, was granted a rally permit at EDSA. However, the overtly anti-Marcos left — whose demands included the resignation of Marcos, Jr. — was denied one.¹⁷ The latter group nevertheless protested, breaking through a police barricade, which escalated tensions and resulted in the arrest of two protesters.¹⁸

Although both opposition blocs align on a [common anti-Duterte position](#), they remain divided over the ousting of Marcos, Jr., reflecting persistent difficulties in unifying under a common strategy ahead of the presidential election in 2028, for

which Vice President Sara Duterte formally announced her candidacy days earlier.¹⁹

Footnotes

- 1 [X @PakistanUN_NY, 11 November 2025](#)
- 2 [X @Valle_Riccardo_, 27 February 2026](#)
- 3 [Callum Jones, "US backs Pakistan's 'right to defend itself' against Taliban after strikes on Afghanistan," The Guardian, 28 February 2026](#)
- 4 [Callum Jones, "US backs Pakistan's 'right to defend itself' against Taliban after strikes on Afghanistan," The Guardian, 28 February 2026](#)
- 5 [Hafsa Khalil, "Pakistan defence minister says country in 'open war' with Afghanistan after strikes," BBC, 27 February 2026](#)
- 6 [X @khorasandiary, 3 March 2026](#)
- 7 [The Irrawaddy, "Junta Airstrikes, Troop Deployments Follow Ex-Resistance Leader's Surrender in Sagaing," 19 February 2026](#)
- 8 [Facebook, "Press release," Ministry of Home Affairs of the National Unity Government, 18 February 2026 \(Burmese\); Facebook, "Press Statement on the Status of Actions Taken Against Offenders by the BNRA Group," Ministry of Defence of the National Unity Government, 19 February 2026 \(Burmese\)](#)
- 9 [Network Media Group, "NUG orders shutdown of 75 unauthorized checkpoints in Shwebo District," Burma News International, 2 March 2026](#)
- 10 [Humza Jilani and Lucy Fisher, "Pakistan urges Iran not to attack Saudi Arabia," The Financial Times, 3 March 2026](#)
- 11 [AFP, Anadolu, and the Associated Press, "Pakistan calls troops, orders 3-day curfew as 24 killed in pro-Iran rallies," 2 March 2026](#)
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- 15 [Philippine Daily Inquirer, "Ex-president's supporters, critics keep eye on ICC hearing," 24 February 2026; Michelle Abad, "Pro-, anti-Duterte groups clash over justice as ICC hearing begins," Rappler, 24 February 2026](#)

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- 17 [Arlie O. Calalo, “No stage for Bayan, pro-Duterte groups at People Power Monument,” The Manila Times, 23 February 2026; Jason Sigales, “Why 2 Edsa rallies? Opposition ‘united but with differences,’ says Bayan,” INQUIRER.net, 25 February 2026](#)
- 18 [Jason Sigales, “Edsa at 40: Cops block protesters at Edsa Shrine over no permit,” INQUIRER.net, 25 February 2026; Kodao Productions, “People power defeats rally ban by another Marcos,” 26 February 2026](#)
- 19 [Dwight de Leon, “Sara Duterte announces 2028 presidential bid amid fresh impeachment complaint,” Rappler, 18 February 2026](#)

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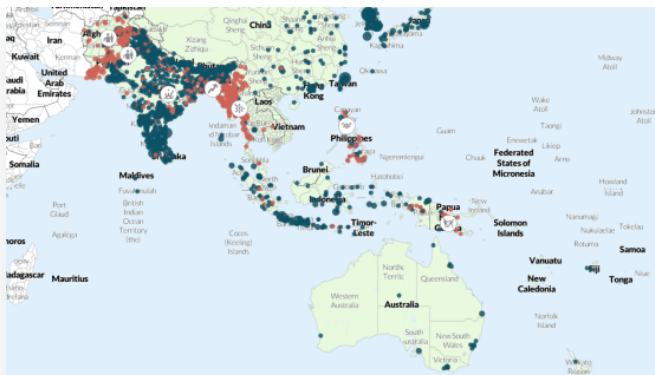
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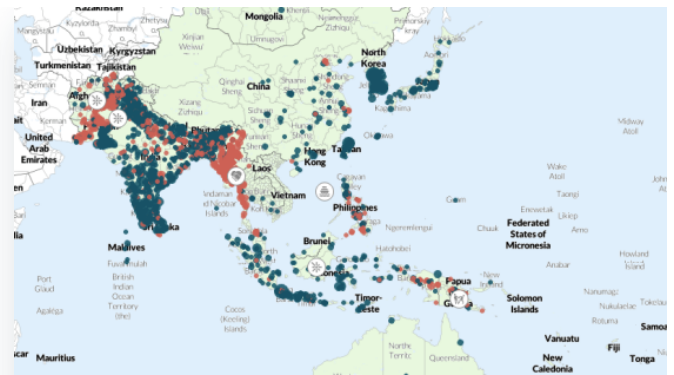


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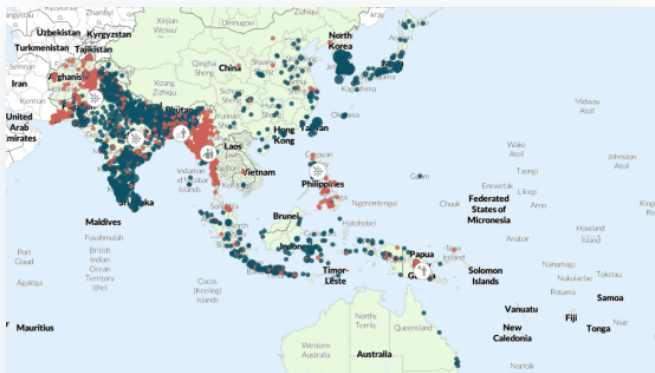
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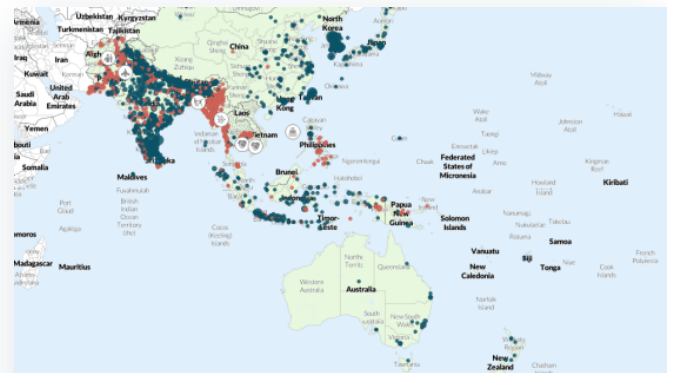
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