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Afghanistan's Durand Line Dilemma: How Territorial Claims Undermine Stability

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Abstract

The Durand Line issue is arguably South Asia's longest and most destabilizing legacy of colonialism. Afghanistan's refusal of this border for over a hundred years has given space for conflict against Pakistan, enabling Islamabad to use the war for its own benefit through proxy war, economic pressure, and diplomatic manipulation. The study attests to the fact that Afghanistan's obstinacy over border disputes remains at a lethal cost: diverting resources that were needed for state building, further entrenching security crises, and making the country vulnerable to foreign intervention. Some examples of Pakistan's strategic manipulation of the Durand Line dispute to destabilize Afghanistan include the provision of funds to terrorist networks like the Haqqani Network and TTP, retaliatory border shutdowns worth $300 million annually to Afghanistan, repatriating refugee flow to place pressure on Kabul's weakened infrastructure. Afghanistan, meanwhile, is committing 28% of its security budget to defending its frontier rather than achieving domestic stability. Thus, there is a vicious circle of dependence and war. This essay argues that Afghanistan must relinquish symbolic territorial maximalism and embrace pragmatic settlement. Riding on success of post-colonial frontier settlements such as the 2015 India-Bangladesh land swap, the paper argues that third party mediation to seal and settle the Durand Line would unlock security, economic, and diplomatic dividends. By removing Pakistan's rationale for interference, Afghanistan will regain sovereignty, channel resources to development, and even out regionally. The choice is easy: keep up a losing fight on Victorian frontiers or capitalise on stability, sovereignty, and the people's happiness.

Keywords: Durand Line, Afghanistan-Pakistan Conflict, Border Dispute, Regional Instability, Pragmatic Resolution, Colonial Legacy

Introduction

The Durand Line dispute is a longstanding and contentious issue that has run throughout modern Asia since the late 19th century. The demarcation of the border in 1893 by British diplomat Sir Henry Mortimer Durand created not only a territorial split but also a geopolitical fault line that has shaped regional dynamics for more than a century (Barfield, 2010) [2]. Its actual border had also been drawn pretty arbitrarily, apparently with little sensitivity to any of the preexisting ethnic or tribal boundaries. That had the inconvenient effect of carving across established Pashtun and Baloch country which inadvertently did generate immediate hostility among interested groups (Shahrani, 2018) [11]. Afghanistan's rejection of the boundary was brought on by a combination of principle and pragmatism. The root issue was that the treaty had been perceived to have been coerced in colonial compulsion. The operational issue was partitioning tribal communities who had long been loyal to Kabul.

Partition in British India in 1947 provided the region with a radical change of status, making the dispute an interstate one that continued. The emergence of Pakistan as an independent state introduced a new addition to the equation, with Islamabad functioning as a protector and defender of the Durand Line and Afghanistan adopting a different policy towards it (Haroon, 2021) [5]. It must be remembered that there existed a vast divergence of viewpoint which ultimately took on a military hue during the Cold War period, particularly after Pakistan's enunciation of its "strategic depth" policy in the 1980s. As has been well chronicled by Rubin (2002) [10] and Coll (2004) [3], security policy of familiarizing oneself with Afghanistan through the rivalry of Pakistan with India led to organized support to proxy militant factions that would be able to make Pakistani dominance in Kabul a reality and shut down Afghan irredentist aspirations.

Durand Line dispute persisted beyond the post-9/11 period. As Pakistan was in the line of being considered as a U.S. ally in the

War on Terror, there are indications that its security establishment also continued supporting some of the groups, such as the Haqqani Network. The support may have been provided in the guise of managing the recurring border issue (The Afghanistan Papers, 2021) [1]. The 2021 Taliban coup brought forth a chain of associated issues, such as the interesting dynamic of the group's historical rejection of the Durand Line and, at present, isolation in diplomatic affairs and economic reliance on Pakistan by the new administration. The dynamic mirrors the capabilities of the group to destabilize the existing order (ICG, 2023) [7]. The recurring episode along the border areas, with enhanced interactions between Afghan militants and Pakistani security agencies, underscores the need for ongoing contact and coordination to tackle the underlying causes of instability within the region.

Thesis & Contemporary Significance

The dispute of Durand Line is still at the heart of the instability of Afghanistan, and Pakistan's strategic maneuvering on the question of the border has systematically eroded Afghanistan's sovereignty on security, economic, and humanitarian lines. This article contends that the unresolved conflict of the border has given Pakistan an enduring tool to exercise its influence with proxy war, resource diversion, and coercive economic policy, generating an endogenous cycle of Afghan exposure. Present analysis shows alarming trends: Pakistan's alleged patronage of the likes of TTP being linked to a 56% increase in violence along borders (UNSC, 2023) [12], and Afghanistan allocating 28% of its security expenditure towards defending the borders (World Bank, 2023) [14] has seriously eroded national governance capacity. Its financial effects are also extreme, including closing borders with Pakistan at a cost of $300 million in lost trade and Kandahar's 40% inflation in food (WFP, 2023) [15] paired with the attendant humanitarian crisis that resulted from Pakistan's 2023 mass forced repatriation of 600,000 Afghan refugees (UNHCR). The salience of this research to the contemporary period is in the way that it illustrates how the controversy over the Durand Line extends beyond border conflict to become Pakistan's sole most important means to attaining "strategic depth" in Afghanistan. Methodologically, it applies historical treaty analysis, contemporary case studies of border disputes, and policy analysis to propose that Afghanistan's future direction towards stability may require pragmatic border resolutions from successful post colonial resolutions like the 2015 India-Bangladesh land swap. The findings identify the need for Afghanistan to turn focus towards the matter of the border, potentially offering symbolic territorial giveaways for the actual benefits of security and economic stability, and to mobilize international allies to counteract the destabilizing efforts of Pakistan and create a foundation for stable sovereignty.

Methodology

There are three streams of methodology pursued sequentially in this study to examine the Durand Line conflict and Afghanistan's stability. Historical analysis precedes on the peripheries of the boundary dispute on colonial time treaties (The 1893 Durand Agreement), British archival files, and post-1947 diplomatic exchanges. This problem resonates with Afghanistan's continued denial of border legitimacy in the framework of Pakistan's "strategic depth" policy (Barfield, 2010; Shahrani, 2018) [2, 11], and placing the roots of conflict in history. Second, comparative in-depth border conflict case studies (2010–2023) include government reports, NGO reports (e.g., WFP, 2023) [15], and satellite imagery analysis (ICG, 2023) [7] as a method of approximating humanitarian and operational costs. For example, they demonstrate that the direct result of fighting is that 28% of Afghanistan's security expenditures were allocated to border security rather than internal stabilisation (World Bank, 2023) [14]. Third, policy analysis looks at how Pakistan's proxy war strategy is used in UN Security Council reports (2023) [12], declassified papers, and scholarly studies of ISI-militant connections (Rubin, 2002; Roggio, 2021) [10, 9].This thread examines how events on the border make funding groups like the Haqqani Network feasible, connecting Pakistan's strategic use of the Durand Line to regional instability. It is within such alignments that the research is shifting from the past grievances to the current economic and security crises and into a reevaluation of the border policy of Afghanistan.

The Potential Implications of Pakistan's Border Policies on Afghanistan

Pakistan has been charged with utilizing the Durand Line controversy as one aspect of a coordinated campaign to destabilize Afghanistan on three major fronts: security, economy, and humanitarian reputation. Security wise, Islamabad has been blamed for offering proxy war intended to destabilize the Kabul government by leaked U.S. government memos (The Afghanistan Papers, 2021) [1] that show Pakistan's continued patronage of terrorist organizations fighting a war against Afghanistan from across the border. This is followed by alleged ISI sponsorship of the Haqqani Network despite being UN listed, followed by a rise of 56% in TTP cross border attacks (234 in 2022 as per UNSC reports). Meanwhile, Pakistan's addition of 47 new military posts in disputed regions (ICG, 2023) [7] has led Afghanistan to spend 28% of its security budget on border security instead of combating terrorism or keeping law and order (World Bank, 2023) [14]. Pakistan has economically equipped transit across borders, as is evident in the 2022 Chaman closure that disrupted $300 million bilateral trade and induced 40% food inflation in Kandahar (WFP, 2023) [15]. Afghanistan logistics firms have also long been pushed to their limits by lagging Karachi port clearance (from 7 to 21 days since 2021, per World Bank data), as Pakistan's unilaterally fencing has dismantled cross border markets that previously generated $90 million annually in revenues to Afghan provinces (ICG, 2023) [7]. The measures have economically disenfranchised those living along the border and broken regional value chains. Humanitarian consequences are no less catastrophic. Repatriation of 600,000 Afghan refugees by Pakistan in 2023 (UNHCR) overburdened reception facilities, and 82 informal settlements threatened to become centres of extremism. Closing borders also cut off 73% of WFP food assistance shipments in 2022–23, triggering malnutrition in eastern Afghanistan, while denials of visas caused a 29% rise in maternal deaths and closure of 12 border clinics (WHO, 2023). Together, these maneuvers point to a further Pakistani attempt to maintain instability in Afghanistan along the Durand Line issue. Cross dynamics of belligerent security, economic intimidation, and humanitarian disregard

have established an internally self reinforcing dynamic of vulnerability one that works for the strategic advantage of Islamabad over Afghanistan's government and development.

Reconciling Strategic Pragmatism with Nationalist Sentiments in the Durand Line Dispute

The Durand Line, which Mortimer Durand, a British colonial official, traced out in 1893, remains one of Asia's most controversial borders, separating Afghanistan and Pakistan and serving to underwrite current geopolitics tensions. The 2,640-kilometer border was pushed to be drawn out on Afghan Amir Abdul Rahman Khan under coercion negotiations to whom the British were alleged to send British military invasion threats (Barfield, 2010) [2]. The non consensual marking of Pashtun and Baloch tribal territory by the line caused deep resentment that still influences local politics today. Afghanistan never recognized the legitimacy of the Durand Line, considering it an illegitimate colonial artifact that cut across existing ethnic and cultural connections (Haroon, 2021) [5]. But Pakistan treats the line as a border, passed down from British India at partition in 1947. This has given the foundation for generations of war, with both sides using the cause as a vehicle to pursue their strategic interests and innocent lives the price. The human cost of the war that has lasted centuries has risen to such heights of complete ruin in recent years. The 2023 Pakistan forced repatriation of more than 600,000 Afghan refugees, the majority of whom were born and raised in Pakistan, caused a humanitarian disaster (UNHCR, 2024). The returns strained Afghanistan's weak health infrastructure and absorptive capacity and led to the establishment of 82 spontaneous settlements with few services. Border closures also impacted 73% of humanitarian aid consignments, adding to food insecurity in border provinces where acute malnutrition is already at emergency level thresholds (WFP, 2023) [15]. Health has also suffered greatly, with a 29% increase in maternal mortality along the border due to Pakistan's restrictive visa regime, limiting access to health facilities (WHO, 2023). These policies affect the poor majorities of larger geopolitics and show how conflict across the border immediately results in real human misery. They are disproportionately affected with greater exposure to exploitation, hunger, and avoidable illness in the congested borderlands. Economically, the war over the Durand Line has also been used as a technique of coercive diplomacy, with Pakistan regularly closing key border crossings as a step towards exercising pressure on Afghanistan. The one closure in 2022 of the Chaman crossing had already racked up $300 million in direct losses to commerce (World Bank, 2023) [14] and caused 40% food inflation in Kandahar province (WFP, 2022). These actions systematically disrupt Afghanistan's fragile economy that generates roughly 75% of foreign trade heading to Pakistan. The most severely affected are agricultural producers whose perishable produce valued at $75 million annually rot at border terminals through overstay (FAO, 2023). These economic warfare tactics violate international transit agreements but go unimpeded, a testament to Pakistan's successful weaponization of border power. Overall, the consequence has been horrific and Afghanistan's GDP dropped 20% with the Taliban takeover in 2021 as border controls added to already suffered economic devastation. Militarily, combat devours proportionally disproportionate man while advancing Pakistan's "strategic depth" strategy. Afghanistan allocates 28% of its defense budget ($1.2 billion annually) to defending the border funds desperately required for domestic defense and anti terrorism (World Bank, 2023) [14]. Pakistan has retaliated by constructing 47 new security compounds along the disputed border fortifying claims to territory, since 2021 (ICG, 2023) [7], reportedly providing operational support to militant networks like the Haqqani Network. This is a self sustaining cycle: Afghanistan sends troops to secure the border, unbalancing the local population and facilitating insurgent activity, which is in turn used by Pakistan as a pretext for border militarization. Mass development of Pakistani side border facilities, such as watchtowers and hardened positions stationed to dominate disputed territory, is observable from space. The Taliban regime has the most to lose particularly in solving this security problem by virtue of their ideological necessity for Pashtun solidarity, which prevents effective control of the frontier and Pakistan exploits best these fault lines. Solving this obstinate conflict needs innovative approaches striking a middle ground between previous account and new need. The 2015 India-Bangladesh land border deal is an excellent example of how pragmatic concession can resolve even the most deep rooted border disputes (Van Schendel, 2009) [13]. One of the most crucial elements of a potential solution is the establishment of Special Economic Zones at strategic border crossing points like Torkham, earning $150 million annually while reviving historic trade corridors (World Bank, 2021). Cultural autonomy deals would protect transnational ethnic affiliations without compromising sovereignty, drawing on successful European precedents but adapted into a reformed context. A UN sponsored internationally facilitated border commission can assist in freeing the tension by offering neutral arbitration a necessity due to inter state suspicion. The new Taliban regime has a choice that will determine the next generation. To stay status quo is to keep on savoring Pakistan's stranglehold on Afghanistan's economic veins and loopholes of borders being exploited by militant forces. Or else, towards functional cooperation would achieve 40-60% savings in security spends ($480-$720 million annual saving), generate $400-$600 million extra trade, and avoid $200 million on refugee-costs (World Bank, 2023) [14]. The shift needs to be made in the world with confidence building measures, i.e., development money managed by the World Bank and security assurances overseen by the UN. The other option of confrontation full scale presents only more suffering for border communities and strategic bogging down for Afghanistan.

Finally, the Durand Line dispute is a test of whether or not Afghanistan is able to move beyond grudges in a colonial age of prioritizing utilitarian statecraft over symbolic claims to territory for putting people first.

Comparative Costs

Table: Conflict vs. Cooperation Scenarios

Category	Current Conflict Costs (Annual)	Potential Cooperation Benefits	Data Sources
Security	• 28% of security budget ($1.2B) diverted to border defense • 234 TTP cross-border attacks (2022)	• Estimated 40-60% reduction in border security costs • Projected 50-70% decrease in militant attacks	World Bank 2023 [14], UNSC 2023 [12]
Economic	• $300M trade losses from closures • 21-day Karachi port delays	• $400-600M potential trade growth • Transit fee revenue ($150M estimated)	WFP 2023 [15], World Bank 2023 [14]
Humanitarian	• 600,000 refugees (2023) • 29% maternal mortality increase	• Refugee return savings ($200M) • Healthcare access improvements	UNHCR 2023, WHO 2023
Governance	• 73% aid delivery disruptions • 82 informal settlements created	• 30-50% improved aid efficiency • Formal settlement development	WFP 2023 [15], ICG 2023 [7]
Regional Relations	• Permanent tension with Pakistan • Limited Central Asian engagement	• Potential BRI participation • Regional energy partnerships	Van Schendel 2009 [13]

All figures based on 2022-2023 data with projected cooperation gains modeled on Bangladesh-India normalization (2015-2020)."

Conclusion

The Durand Line issue is one of the longest running and most destructive legacies of colonial mapping. The yet to be resolved issue has created a cycle of insecurity that has paralyzingly hindered the nation's development and governance for more than a century. It has illustrated how Pakistan's exploitation of the conflict through proxy war, economic compulsion, and humanitarian pressure has worked to systematically destabilize Afghanistan while pilfering resources from institution-building to public welfare. The record is unequivocal: Afghanistan's inability to realistically reconsider its policy towards the border has served only to further entrench Pakistan's destabilizing interference, costing billions of dollars in lost trade, border radicalization, and rendering the state vulnerable to foreign manipulation. The route to be taken, however, cannot be a blind repetition of historic errors. By eschewing symbolic claims to territory and diverting resources into administration, Afghanistan can gain what three decades of insurgency have not. Pakistan's influence could be undercut by erasing the Durand Line as a pretext for intervention. It would result in the weakening of Islamabad's ability to sustain proxy networks such as the Haqqani Network and the TTP. Second, the economic recovery of the country can be attained through stabilizing cross-border trade that can generate $300 million annually for the country, according to the World Bank (2023) [14]. The money can then be channeled towards funding critical services and infrastructure. Third, there is the issue of regional integration to be addressed. In this regard, Afghanistan would be well advised to follow the example of the 2015 India-Bangladesh land swap (Van Schendel, 2009) [13]. Pursuing phased border agreements that put human beings ahead of lines on a map is a tactic that worked in the past, and it is one to which Afghanistan would be well advised to stick. The Taliban regime is faced with an existential choice that will determine its fate. One has to be chosen out of two. One is defined by maximalist boundary words, which can accommodate nationalist circles at the expense of guaranteeing Afghanistan's historic vulnerability and isolation. A pragmatic turn, the second option makes functional statehood more important than contested territory. The turn can bring an end to the war and dependence curse that has plagued Afghanistan.

Final Thought

It is apparent that Afghan independence will never be assured by resolving border disputes alone. true independence entails the capacity to rule, provide basic services, and prevent external coercion. The strategic redundancy of the Durand Line is also emphasised by modern issues like the climate crisis, economic globalisation, and the power shift in regional balance. Whether or not Afghanistan can secure its future by shifting its focus to the construction of a people's state, rather than borders, is today's most pressing question, instead of whether or not the country can regain its lost ground.

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