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A Retrospection on the Relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan

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Introduction

The year 2026 has witnessed a sudden surge in armed conflicts across the globe. They occur in different regions such as the US-Iran War, the ongoing Russia-Ukraine War, the Sudan Crisis and the Afghanistan-Pakistan conflict. A common trend in these wars lies in deep-seated tensions among the parties in conflict, which have been brewing throughout history. This issue brief explores the three factors shaping the diplomacy between Afghanistan and Pakistan, viz., **the existence of the Durand Line, bitter memories of great power politics during the Cold War, and a chequered history of ethnic terrorism**. The focus is on Afghanistan and Pakistan's dynamic because it has implications for the security dilemma in the Middle East and South Asia.

On February 26th, 2026, Pakistan launched "Operation Ghazab Lil-Haq", which initiated an "open war" against Afghanistan, five days following airstrikes by the former along the Durand Line¹. Despite a truce on March 18th, 2026, on the occasion of Eid al-Fitr, Pakistan has been accused of violating the ceasefire, with Afghanistan not responding to the attacks yet². It seems baffling that, following the creation of a new Taliban regime in Afghanistan in 2021, a closer strategic partnership was expected to be developed between the two countries, reminiscent of the relationship during the first Taliban regime. However, the two countries are now in a 'near-war' situation³.

The reason for this change in the dynamic between the two countries can be explored with the Critical International Relations Theory (CIRT). The theory is most useful for analysis because it helps respond to the empirical curiosity, pursue moral politics and rise to the challenges of the times⁴. It is used as a framework to weigh the factors mentioned earlier to recommend some policy ideas or initiatives. The analysis from this brief will show that Afghanistan and Pakistan do not share the same goals despite being Islamic theocracies and having a semblance of brotherhood; their relationship is one of ideological ambiguity as a result of the pursuit of material ambitions.

¹ Jadoon, A., & Jadoon, A. (2026, March 17). *Open War at the Durand Line: Can Pakistan's Escalation Compel a Taliban Recalculation?* War on the Rocks.

https://warontherocks.com/2026/03/open-war-at-the-durand-line-can-pakistans-escalation-compel-a-taliban-recalculation/?utm_campaign=understanding-pakistan-s-security-crisis-the-research-behind-the-headlines-2017-2026&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=www.duranddispatch.com

² Shekhawat, S. (2026, March 25). *Drifting Further from Resolution: The Escalating Afghanistan–Pakistan Crisis*. orfonline.org.

<https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/drifting-further-from-resolution-the-escalating-afghanistan-pakistan-crisis>

³ ibid

⁴Booth, K. (2007). *Theory of world Security*. In Cambridge University Press & British International Studies Association, *Cambridge Studies in International Relations*. Cambridge University Press. <https://www.cambridge.org/9780521835527>

The Frontier Problem

The sovereignty of the countries is highly dependent on territorial integrity, as established in the Montevideo Convention of 1933⁵. When territory gets contested on the grounds of ideology, ethnicity, or as part of a strategic calculus, the resultant security dilemma fuels interstate rivalry, which, if left uncontrolled by law, erodes all possible roads towards cooperation in the international order⁶. The Durand Line is one of the most precarious borders in the world⁷. It was discussed as part of an agreement between Sir Mortimer Durand, a secretary representing British India, and Abdur Rahman Khan, then Amir of Afghanistan, in November 1893⁸. It is a 2,640 km-long border meant to divide the administrative power in the Pashtun region (from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa till Baluchistan) between British India and Afghanistan. The reason for the British to propose the line was that the Pashtun people, hill tribes residing near the Bolen Pass, committed raids in the lowlands of Punjab, hindering the British's efforts to annex that region in 1849⁹. The tribes also refused to cooperate with them in expanding their regime, which fuelled the desire to develop a frontier line as an excuse to push the majority of the tribes out of north-western India. The Amir was reluctant to trust the British and sign such an agreement because during the two Afghan Wars (1839-1880), the British had attempted to create civil unrest in Kabul and occupy Sindh to prevent the Russians, their archenemy during the colonial era, from occupying Indian territory. However, the Amir had no other alternative to strengthen his reign in the region because the Russian forces were close to Herat, considered the gateway to India, giving them the edge to control Afghanistan in 1888¹⁰. It was hoped that the proposed demarcation of the two countries might help bridge a consensus among the three regimes. That hope soon proved to be futile because the maps drawn and discussed by the British were not acceptable to either the Russians or the Afghans, and no fixed border was decided in the region. These tensions resulted in the Third Anglo-Afghan War, where the British lost, and the line was deemed a frontier in the Treaty of Rawalpindi signed in 1919. The treaty allowed the British to form the North-West Frontier Province from the remaining Pashtun-occupied land, consisting of the Balochi Tribe, as a buffer state against future conflicts with other Western powers.

The early post-colonial history of Afghanistan and Pakistan showed that the two countries use political, economic and military means instead of diplomacy to silence, instead of resolving the differences with the other country. Following the Partition in 1947, the influence of the British waned, prompting Afghanistan

⁵Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States (1933).

<https://www.ilsa.org/Jessup/Jessup15/Montevideo%20Convention.pdf>

⁶ View of The Durand Line. *The Afghan Pakistani Border Region between Pashtunistan, Tribalistan and Talibanistan*. (n.d.). <https://hasp.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/journals/iaf/article/view/1338/1320>

⁷ The Durand Line. (n.d.). <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/durand-line/>

⁸ ibid

⁹Lambah, S. (2012). The Durand Line. *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal*.

https://www.jstor.org/stable/45341803?searchText=&searchUri=&ab_segments=&searchKey=&refreqid=fastly-default%3A9a2293a1708e20bf775ce5615ead84d2&initiator=recommender&seq=1

¹⁰ ibid

to contest the 1893 and 1919 treaties with the newly created Pakistan, arguing that there was no binding legal or political document to preserve the existence of the border. On the other hand, Pakistan accepted the frontier under the principle of “*uti possidetis juris*”, which maintains that newly independent countries should retain the boundaries established by their former colonial rulers¹¹. The complex conflict over the legality of the frontier through the enforceability of a principle over a binding bilateral treaty determined the politics between the two countries during the Cold War. Afghanistan initiated the politics by declaring August 31 as ‘Pashtunistan Day’ in 1947, through a parliamentary session that also rejected all the treaties and conventions regarding the Durand Line¹². It also became the only country to reject Pakistan’s membership in the United Nations General Assembly on September 30, 1947, using the principle of self-determination as the reason and accusing Pakistan of not giving the residents of the North-West Frontier Province their right to decide their allegiance¹³. Pakistan responded by bombarding a nearby Afghan village in 1949 and cutting off trade supplies to Karachi to isolate the country from the emerging world order. The Soviet Union (USSR) saw Pakistan’s actions as an opportunity to reclaim Afghanistan and signed a four-year bilateral trade agreement with the latter on July 17, 1950¹⁴. Pakistan responded to the agreement by aligning with the United States (US) through membership of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) and the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO) in 1954, thereby receiving military support from the US. Around that same year, Afghanistan also requested military assistance from the US as a way to balance its capabilities with Pakistan. The US rejected the request, and the reason provided by the then Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, was: “*Instead of asking for arms, Afghanistan should settle the Pashtunistan dispute with Pakistan*”.¹⁵ The statement clearly showed the US’s disinterest in weighing Afghanistan in its strategic calculus with the Soviet Union. Later, Pakistan implemented the One-Unit Scheme, which combined all of the provinces of the then ‘West Pakistan’ into one political entity in 1955. Afghanistan’s opposition to the scheme was shown by the masses that attacked the embassy in Kabul and replaced the Pakistani Flag with the Pashtunistan Flag. Pakistan’s reaction to the incident was shown through a meeting of SEATO countries that took place in Karachi in March 1956, and those powers recognised the Durand Line as an international border. This kind of political manoeuvring by the two countries continued for two decades, eventually culminating in an Afghan Cell that was created under the foreign ministry of Pakistan in 1973. The reason for the unit was to develop an armed lobby consisting of Afghans with training in guerrilla warfare that can promote Pakistan’s interests in Afghanistan’s domestic political landscape. Pakistan also intended to prevent any future secession similar to the separation of ‘East Pakistan’, later renamed as Bangladesh, during the 1971 war with India. The fear the country felt when making the decision made it clear that the conflict with Afghanistan soon seeped into terrorism.

¹¹ Kaura, V. (2016). The Durand Line Dispute: Past Trends and Future Prospects. *Indian Journal of Political Science*. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26575674?seq=1>

¹² *ibid*

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ *ibid*

¹⁵ *ibid*

Cross-Border Terrorism?

The history of terrorism in relation to Afghanistan and Pakistan proves that the common link is not the military dictatorship of the elites, but the phased radicalisation of Pashtun tribes whose interests are misused, instead of being addressed, to conduct acts of war, instead of implementing a peaceful referendum. As early as the 1920s, the Pashtun tribes supported Afghanistan's position because it aligned with their own nationalist objectives to reconnect with their brethren and restore 'Pashtunistan'. The land was believed to have existed since ancient history and was documented by the Greek historian, Herodotus, under the name 'Pactyica'.¹⁶ The surge in 'Pashtun Nationalism' occurred after Pakistan bombarded a village in 1949 and soon used economic pressure to prevent the export of goods to India. This form of nationalism is a crucial factor behind the complications of the Durand Line because it caused some of the Pashtun members to try to regain the lost territory violently. Pakistan had formed the Afghan Cell in 1973 to dictate Afghan politics, and the members of that cell were recruited to the Frontier Corps, which specialised in wireless communication and covert operations. The significance of the Frontier Corps was seen at play during the 1979 invasion by the USSR, which became the immediate factor for Afghanistan to also engage in terrorism. The Mujahideen, people given training by Pakistan and funded by the US, began to stage an uprising to overthrow the then Karmal and Najibullah communist governments in Afghanistan, resulting in the Soviets sending their troops to support the latter. The conflict was viewed as a hot spot for the politics of the two superpowers, and Pakistan partially benefited from the excuse to change Afghanistan's internal politics. The country rose to become America's frontline ally and trained the members of the Mujahideen in refugee camps along the Durand Line to remove the communist governments. It was hoped that Afghanistan could be reasoned with force and would accept the Durand Line and not engage in any dialogue on Pashtunistan, but that hope soon proved to be futile. When the Soviets withdrew their forces in 1992, owing to domestic upheaval in Russia, communism fell in Afghanistan, and some members of the Mujahideen regrouped as Taliban, forming a new government, and they neither recognised the Durand Line nor curbed Pashtun nationalism along the contested border. In retrospect, it may be noted that Pakistan escalated the problem instead of resolving it, and it reached its zenith due to the country's actions during the US's War on Terror in 2001.

2001 was the unipolar moment of the US, ended by the 9/11 attacks, to which Al-Qaeda, under the leadership of Osama Bin Laden, claimed responsibility. The intelligence agencies, especially the CIA, pinpointed his location in Afghanistan, prompting the US to invade Afghanistan in the same year. The US formed a coalition of allies, including Britain and Canada and attacked Afghanistan on October 7, 2001.¹⁷ Pakistan allowed the US to use its territory as a base to conduct operations and supply arms. Afghanistan's conflict with the US concluded in December 2001 with the fall of the Taliban regime, and the conflict with Pakistan began when there was a crackdown on the remaining Al-Qaeda members. Although Pakistan was

¹⁶ Qureshi, S. M. M. (1966). *Pakhtunistan: The Frontier Dispute Between Afghanistan and Pakistan*. *Pacific Affairs*. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2755184?searchText=&searchUri=&ab_segments=&searchKey=&refreqid=fastly-default%3AAdd3690becb3ee99420032546df51ebe77&initiator=recommender&seq=1

¹⁷ *The war in Afghanistan*. (n.d.). George W. Bush Library. <https://www.georgewbushlibrary.gov/research/topic-guides/the-war-in-afghanistan>

open to these groups living in their territory, pressure from the US and its allies forced them to capture some of these members living in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA)¹⁸. The operations conducted were criticised by the Pashtun tribes, who rallied behind some of the members of Al-Qaeda and Taliban and formed a new terrorist group, Tehrik-i-Taliban (TTP), in 2007. The TTP is an umbrella organisation aimed at overthrowing the then-military government in Pakistan and forming a new Pashtun-centric government similar to the Taliban regime¹⁹. The base of its initiatives has been the NWFP, which had the maximum population of Pashtuns, and the group indirectly initiated its first operation by making a few Islamic fundamentalist militants seize the ‘Lal Majid’ in July 2007, which the government was able to quell using the military despite huge losses of life.²⁰ The TTP soon became the largest and deadliest organisation responsible for many terror attacks in Pakistan in 2013-14, and declined later in around 2017 due to infighting among the members for leadership. Some of these members were given shelter in Afghanistan by the Afghan Taliban, and these members joined them to aid in their resurgence in 2021, forming a new Taliban government. In return, the Taliban released TTP prisoners and sponsored them with arms, which they used to conduct 32 attacks in Pakistan in the same year, the highest in terms of suicide attacks.²¹ The informal alliance of the Taliban and the TTP allowed the latter to use the territories of Kandahar and others close to the Durand Line as a base to conduct their operations in Pakistan.²² The alliance is the reason for the TTP to engage in political violence in Pakistan in general and the recent border skirmishes in Baluchistan and South Waziristan in particular.

Recommendations Through the Security Problematique

The history of the relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan makes it clear that the main issue is with the governance of the tribal areas along the Durand Line. An Indian scholar noted that since both countries have ‘inherited’ the border, the administration of these areas and curbing terrorism must be the responsibility of Pakistan.²³ This reasoning is fallacious because it did not consider the interests of Afghanistan, as the country kept denying that the border is not inherited, and Pakistan does not have a good track record in counterterrorism. In fact, this exact solution was carried out by Pakistan following the 2001 invasion, resulting in the controversy over the former leader of Al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden, receiving aid

¹⁸ Gunaratna, R., & Nielsen, A. (2008). Al Qaeda in the tribal areas of Pakistan and beyond. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 31(9), 775–807. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100802291568>

¹⁹ Akhtar, S., & Ahmed, Z. S. (2023). Understanding the resurgence of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan. *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict*, 16(3), 285–306. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17467586.2023.2280924>

²⁰ *ibid*

²¹ *ibid*

²² *ibid*

²³ Kaura, V. (2016). The Durand Line Dispute: Past Trends and Future Prospects. *Indian Journal of Political Science*. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26575674?seq=1>

from the Pakistani government in finding a sanctuary in the military city of Abbottabad.²⁴ The incident is proof that the permanent solution to the conflict needs further exploration. Ken Booth, scholar on the Critical International Relations Theory (CIRT), argued that insecurity is a life-determining condition. He said, “...It is in the condition of insecurity that the politics of the meaning of security begin. Insecurity involves living in fear, with dangers arising from one or more types of threat...”.²⁵ It means that as long as countries fear each other, they will engage in policies meant to prevent perceived threats from the other. However, they do not realise that some of them may not be actual threats, and those policies may bring more harm than good. The complex political and military game played by Afghanistan and Pakistan aptly fits in this situation. David Baldwin, scholar at Princeton University, redefined security as an ambiguous concept that is dependent on the specific socio-economic conditions of countries for rationalising a policy.²⁶ These conditions are classified under two parameters:

1. Security for whom?

The state must define the victim of a perceived threat, which could be either the civilians, an ally, the government, a territory, or an ideology. Afghanistan’s conflict with the Durand Line stemmed from the loss of territory due to the actions of the British in the Treaty of Rawalpindi. Pakistan’s dismissal of Afghanistan’s claims was due to existential fear following the Kashmir dispute and the Partition in 1947. Hence, in the view of both countries, territory is the victim of the perceived threats.

2. Security for which values?

Each state has a different set of values based on its historical experiences. These values determine their reaction to crises. Afghanistan considers Pashtun nationalism, the idea of ‘Pashtunistan’, and the togetherness of the Pashtun tribes as a value that must be preserved because of its historical importance. Pakistan considers the principle of *uti possidetis juris* as a value or convention to preserve because that principle, too, has historical importance. Hence, there is a clash over the importance of representation and conventions, based on which the two countries are engaged in a conflict.

Baldwin also prepared five additional questions, which detail the strategic manoeuvres that the state intends to pursue²⁷:

²⁴ Gunaratna, R., & Nielsen, A. (2008). Al Qaeda in the tribal areas of Pakistan and beyond. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 31(9), 775–807. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100802291568>

²⁵ Booth, K. (2007). Theory of world Security. In Cambridge University Press & British International Studies Association, *Cambridge Studies in International Relations*. Cambridge University Press. <https://www.cambridge.org/9780521835527>

²⁶ Baldwin, D. A. (1997). The concept of security. In British International Studies Association, *Review of International Studies* (pp. 5–26).

²⁷ *ibid*

1. How much security?

No state can be completely secure in all domains due to unequal distribution of resources. There must be a binary choice over the use of a huge quantity of funds either for defence strategies or civilian developments. In the early post-colonial era, Afghanistan utilised the geopolitical forums to condemn Pakistan, while Pakistan used trade to isolate Afghanistan from the economic order. These confrontational policies were because their respective defence capabilities had not developed. Today, the two countries rely heavily on defence and a network of terrorist groups to combat threats because of their respective diplomacy with great powers like the US and the erstwhile Soviet Union.

2. From what threats?

The state must have a clear answer to the nature of the threat. The threat could be anything; either an individual, another state, firms, systems, or other institutions. The nature of the threat has to be specified; otherwise, there would be serious consequences of losing chances at future cooperation. In this case, the threat perception is inchoate, targeting either the government, the terrorist groups or international treaties. Both countries view threats as those that have a stake in controlling their respective territories.

3. By what means?

While there are different methods to ensure security, the context, timing, and resources play a major role in choosing an appropriate one. This is where the two countries falter. As mentioned earlier, the strategies used by both Afghanistan and Pakistan are confrontational, irrespective of the socio-political context, and peaceful diplomacy is either rarely used or has failed. The means used ranged from social engineering to economic pressure to terrorist operations, but the objective of such means is to prevent the issue from being discussed.

4. At what cost?

As mentioned before, due to the scarcity of resources, there will always be a binary and restrictive choice with consequences for a country when responding to a threat. These costs could be economic, military, territorial, environmental, or even ethical. It is helpful to reject the popular phrase, 'whatever it takes', and consider the possible long-term repercussions of such strategies. This could help in careful planning that could avoid unnecessary conflicts. The TTP was formed because of the perceived repressive actions of Pakistan in searching for terrorist elements, when the other sections of the society welcomed it. This resulted in the organisation being the deadliest group in Pakistan, claiming more civilian lives than any other terrorist network, because they believed the country failed them. Both Pakistan and Afghanistan must be encouraged to abandon terrorism as a way to realise goals, but such a persuasion can only come through realising the cost it bears when using it.

5. In what time period?

Policies are dynamic because they adapt to the trends in civilisation. Hence, while certain policies in the short run are useful, it should not come as a surprise that they are not effective in the long run. This is true especially for the principle of *uti possidetis juris*. The principle can be useful to determine the division of administrative power in newly independent countries, but if it causes too much friction among the regions,

a better framework for demarcation must be formed. Perhaps for this reason, the time limit for the 1893 treaty that envisioned the Durand Line was decided at 100 years²⁸. It is long overdue for both Afghanistan and Pakistan to change their tactics.

It must be noted that countries like India, Russia or China cannot be a mediator in the dispute because it would complicate that country's relationship with Pakistan, in terms of geopolitical appeal. However, these countries can aid in setting up a global forum through which Afghanistan and Pakistan can openly negotiate, such as through BRICS or SCO. The global forum is necessary because the decisions reached will be under the watch and consensus of regional powers, as the Durand Line is one of the most precarious borders in the world. Afghanistan and Pakistan may be pressurised to engage through peaceful modes of diplomacy in such a setting and decide on a new frontier based on one parameter, that is, the representation of the tribes living in the region. The negotiation must be conducted through Track-I diplomacy, which is diplomacy by government officials of both countries, because the majority of the incidents that soured the relationship are due to many confrontational policies of both governments. The prospective treaty signed at the conclusion of such negotiations may help in calming the waters among the tribes, and a joint effort can be made to keep terrorist tendencies at bay.

Conclusion

Afghanistan and Pakistan share a history that is similar to that of India and China in terms of sharing certain civilizational roots and yet being drawn to the material needs of the times, which often results in conflicts along the border. The only difference between the two cases is that Afghanistan and Pakistan have engaged more violently in their issues compared to India and China. The relationship between the two countries is shaped by the disputed Durand Line and ethnic terrorism, established in 1893 and in the 1970s, respectively, that divides the Pashtun region. Both countries have used political, economic, and military means to assert their positions, leading to a complex history of conflict and radicalisation of the tribes in the territories, fuelled by differing values, with Afghanistan prioritising Pashtun nationalism and Pakistan emphasising the principle of *uti possidetis juris*. Peace can only be possible through engaging in diplomacy, potentially in a global forum, and considering the representation of the tribes in the region.

²⁸ Qassem, A. (2008). Pak-Afghan Relations: The Durand Line Issue. *Policy Perspectives*. https://www.jstor.org/stable/42909535?searchText=&searchUri=&ab_segments=&searchKey=&refreqid=fastly-default%3A9a2293a1708e20bf775ce5615ead84d2&initiator=recommender&seq=1

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