



## Afghanistan-Pakistan Border to Remain Contentious even with the "Good Taliban"



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There have been repeated instances of clashes between the Pakistan military and the Taliban on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. Videos of the Taliban seizing spools of barbed wire of the fence erected at the contentious Durand Line- Afghanistan-Pakistan border- have gone viral on social media adding to Pakistan's discomfort. The Durand Line was a demarcation drawn by the British administrator Sir Henry Mortimer Durand in a pact with the Afghan Emir Abdur Rahman Khan in 1893. Pakistan inherited the border in 1947 but none of the Afghan regimes have accepted the border as the international boundary and the issue to date remains disputed.

In March 2017 Pakistan started fencing the 2,600 km long border after repeated cross-border attacks on the military posts on Pakistan's side. Pakistan claims that it has completed the fencing of close of 94% of the border. The fence between Afghanistan and Pakistan consists of two sets of chain-link fences separated by a 2-meter space (6 feet) filled with concertina wire coils. The double fence is 3.6 meters high on the Pakistani side and 4 meters high on the Afghan side. The fence has more than 400 forts (in the north western region alone), infrared detectors, surveillance cameras, watchtowers, and over 800 drones. (*Reuters*, September, 2021). The fencing of the Durand Line was strongly opposed by the Ghani government and people from both sides whose families are divided between the two countries.

Fencing the border with Afghanistan has been significant for Islamabad owing to the following factors:

1. The most critical factor has been the contested nature of the border which has always been of deep concern for the Pakistani leadership. The ruling elites have been apprehensive regarding Afghans claiming their right on the Pashtun areas of Pakistan. This has been one of the prime

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factors driving Islamabad's efforts towards facilitating a pro-Pakistan regime in Kabul which would eventually accept the Durand Line as an international border (to Pakistan's advantage!). By putting fence Pakistan wants to physically demarcate the border and, in a way, put an end to the contentious nature of the border.

2. Pakistan has been concerned about strong Pashtun sentiments and concomitant calls for Pashtunistan in its tribal areas. Fencing the borders is also a means to reduce free-flowing movement between two sides and Pakistan hopes to contain and monitor the trans-border support for the Pashtun movement in Pakistan.

3. There have been a series of terror attacks on the civilians and security establishment from the groups like Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) who have their safe havens in Afghanistan. By having a multi-layered fence and imposing strict checks Pakistan wants to guard the cross-border infiltration of terror groups into its territory and doesn't want militants and smugglers to enter Pakistan in the guise of civilians.

4. As the developments regarding the complete US exit from Afghanistan were progressing Islamabad did anticipate the rise in instability in Afghanistan and an expedited surge in Afghan refugees in its territory. Pakistan has already been home to millions of Afghan refugees and border fencing in its view is an effective means to control the Afghan migration into Pakistan. Lt Gen Faiz Hameed, former ISI chief listed terrorism and refugees as Pakistan's top concerns during his meeting with the Taliban leaders in Afghanistan.

Pakistan's efforts to seek "strategic depth" in neighbouring Afghanistan go back to the 1970s. Post 1971 the leadership in Pakistan was determined to not allow any further division of Pakistan and the Pashtun nationalism simmering on its frontier areas was a matter of grave concern. After 1971, Pakistan's grand strategy incorporated two important objectives which decided the future course of action for the Pakistani leadership:

First, to expand territory eastward (take Kashmir). This implied a rise in covert activities in J&K and added emphasis on radical Islam in the name of jihad. Thus, terrorism is to be adopted as a foreign policy tool. Nuclear weapons aimed at war prevention providing a shield to the strategy of sub-conventional war.

Second, to expand control westward (to gain leverage in Kabul). This implied creating strategic depth in Afghanistan and also facilitating Pakistan-friendly governance.

This has been the strategy Islamabad pursued for decades in Afghanistan and perpetually tried to extend its control over Kabul. The Taliban's takeover of Kabul and the defeat of the democratic forces in August 2021 were hailed in Islamabad as a strategic victory.

However, Pakistan miscalculated the Taliban's position on the border, and contrary to its expectations the Taliban have opposed the fence from the time it took over Kabul. Soon after the Taliban claimed victory Taliban spokesman, Zabiullah Mujahid, speaking to Pashtun TV said, "The new Afghan government will announce its position on this issue [the fence along the Durand line]. The fencing has separated people and divided families. We want to create a secure and peaceful environment on the border so there is no need to create barriers."

The Taliban see the fence as a divider between the two nations and Mujahid while giving an interview to a local YouTube channel in Kabul said, "The issue of the Durand Line is still an unresolved one, while the construction of fencing itself creates rifts between a nation spread across both sides of the border. It amounts to dividing a nation".

The Pakistan government, on the other hand, has acknowledged the problem but has tried to downplay the issue and Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi said, "Certain miscreants are raising this issue unnecessarily, but we are looking into it and we are in contact with the Afghan government. Hopefully, we would be able to resolve the issue diplomatically."

Even when the Taliban took control of Afghanistan in the 1990s, they didn't accept the Durand Line as an international boundary. The recent developments indicate that even though Pakistan estimated that it would be able to work the boundary issue to its advantage the realities are quite different. This is not the first time that Pakistan has miscalculated its strategic moves in Kabul.

*(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])*

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