

The Af- Pak Dispute: A Legacy of The Durand Line.



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Praagya Singh

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One of the biggest questions which arises repeatedly in the realm of International relations concerns the historicity of frontiers, and how should the frontiers of empires be aligned with modern nation-states? Over the course of 2000 years in the history of Central Asia, Afghanistan has occupied a very vitally strategic position. It sits between three perennial centers of empire. To the north, an empire, maybe Turkic, maybe Mongol, more recently Russian, with a tendency to move down towards Afghanistan; to the west, Persia; to the south-east, India. In various periods, the land of Afghanistan has been divided between them, either as parts of their empires or else as spheres of influence. But while the question is clear enough – “Where should the frontiers between the empires be set?” – the geography of Afghanistan does not lend itself to any obvious answers. It does not offer anything in the way of coherent physical features to act as clear boundaries. For millennium, Afghanistan has been fought over by would be conquerors, both for its mineral wealth and also for its strategic position at the crossroads of Central and South Asia. Even in the technologically driven world of the twenty-first century, geography still matters.

Today, in the 21st Century, Afghanistan shares borders with six countries, but the approximate 1,500-mile-long Durand Line along Pakistan remains the most obfusate. The history of the Durand line begins with the “the Great Game” between Russian empire and Britishers in the 19th century. The Russian empire was expanding steadily in the Central Asia, one by one Central Asian countries were falling into Russian empire, Afghanistan being very close to British India made Britishers fear for their rule in India. In an effort to secure control of the strategic Khyber Pass, in 1893, Great Britain dispatched a British diplomat, *Mortimer Durand*, to negotiate an agreement to outline the border between Afghanistan and British India. The line was drawn after negotiations between the British government and the Afghan King Amir Abdur Rahman Khan.. After the end of British rule in India, and foundation of Pakistan as a sovereign country and upholding the Durand line as international border continued the dispute. The government of Afghanistan however, subsequently, refused to acknowledge that the frontiers represented by the Durand Line were legally binding. The Durand Line has been a principal issue of Afghanistan’s foreign policy for centuries and continues to be and most importantly remains at the heart of Afghanistan’s relations with Pakistan.

The question of the legitimacy of the Durand Line has poisoned Afghanistan-Pakistan relations for the better part of their engagement as nation-states. For Afghanistan, the loss of half of the traditional Pashtun territories divided its largest tribal grouping. For Pakistan, the issue of the Durand Line is an existential one as any secession would threaten to have a domino effect within Pakistan.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 ushered in a new phase in Afghanistan-Pakistani relations and laid the foundation for a vastly expanded Pakistani role in Afghanistan's internal affairs. Under the guise of Operation Cyclone, a program funded by the Central Intelligence Agency, Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Agency (ISI) organized large numbers of *mujahidin* militant groups that it recruited mainly from the Pashtun tribes on its side of the Durand Line. At the time, the government of General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq had started a program of *aggressive Islamization*, so the ISI favored militant *jihadist* groups as Pakistan's (and the United States') proxies in Afghanistan. The fall of the Najibullah government in April 1992, and the subsequent four years of chaos under *Mujahideen* rule, would set the stage for the rise of the Taliban in 1996 and create an opportunity for Pakistan's ISI to emerge as both the Taliban's financier, organizer and principal patron. The Taliban, in turn, would give Pakistan's ISI an unprecedented opportunity to exert its control over Afghanistan and its government. An opportunity that Pakistan's government has pursued for the last 20 years.

According to a report by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) coauthored by Barnett Rubin and Abu-Bakr Siddique points out: "The long history of each state offering sanctuary to the other's opponents has built bitterness and mistrust between the two neighbors." Following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, Pakistan's then military ruler Zia ul-Haq promoted the jihad in Afghanistan, funded thousands of Islamic madrassas, armed domestic Islamist organizations, and in the process "militarized and radicalized the border region,". The USIP report notes Pakistan sought to support a "client regime in Afghanistan" that would be hostile to India, "giving the Pakistani military a secure border and strategic depth." Moreover, Afghanistan does not even want a regularization of the constitutional position of the Tribal Areas, placing them under the regular laws of Pakistan. Were such a thing to happen, the Afghans feel that the Tribal Areas would be slipping even further out of their grasp.

Recently, in May 2017, **an attack on a Pakistani census team was attributed to the Afghans.** It involved an exchange of fire between Afghan and Pakistani security forces. At least 15 people died on both sides in the immediate border clash. It is one of a series of similar border-related incidents between the two countries. To resolve disputes between Pakistan and Afghanistan, a Council Special Report, authored by Rubin, recommends recognition of an international border by the two countries and cooperative development of the tribal areas on either side. Often clashes lead to closure of the borders, which results in hundreds of thousands of dollars in lost trade, and tonnes of perishable goods rotted in stranded trucks.

Long-term and destructive legacy of European colonialism are borders that were drawn for the sake of political and military expediency but which, given the region's underlying history, culture, and ethnicity. The disputes between Afghanistan and Pakistan over the Durand Line is just one more example of an ill-conceived frontier that continues to inflame the long running dispute between them and harms both countries socially and economically.

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