

A Sorry Tale of the Ever-Problematic Durand Line: Exploring the Nature of the Rising Violence across Pakistan-Afghanistan Border (2021-2025)

¹Muhammad Zahid Sultan

²Dr. Abdul Basit Khan

^{*3}Dr. Shahid Sultan

¹M. Phil (Political Science) Scholar, Department of Political Science, Government College University, Faisalabad.

²Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Government College University, Faisalabad

^{*3}Assistant Professor, College of Law, Government College University, Faisalabad

^{*3}shahid6023@yahoo.com

Abstract

The security situation in the South and Central Asian regions has been drastically transformed following the withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan in August 2021 as the Taliban once again captured the throne quite swiftly turning Afghanistan at the same time a hot zone of unrest making the development troublesome for the neighboring countries in general and for Pakistan in particular owing to the consequent enrichment of the operational capacity of the notorious guerilla outfits including *Fitna al Khawarij* (formerly known as *Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan* (TTP)), and the Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K). As a consequence of the increased militancy within the urban centers of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan chiefly sponsored by these outfits, the relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan also transformed radically and both countries have recently (October 2025) been involved in small scale military engagements and skirmishes across the Durand Line while Pakistan occasionally attacking deeper into the Afghan soil and the situation has been turning more and more complex with every passing day. Accordingly, the current study explores the recent security and political developments alongside the Durand Line which are directly associated with the US withdrawal and the subsequent seizure of power by the Taliban Regime in Afghanistan. It finds that without permanently solving the issue of illegal crossings across the Durand Line and undertaking the negotiating process with Afghan authorities, a deep-rooted and long-lasting peaceful society within the state of Pakistan particularly in the neighboring regions of the Pakistan-Afghan border would be quite difficult to materialize.

Key-Words: Pakistan-Afghan hostility, *Fitna al Khawarij*, *Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan* (TTP), Durand Line

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Corresponding Authors*

Dr. Shahid Sultan

1. Introduction

After the resurgence of Taliban Regime in Afghanistan consequent to the withdrawal of US-led NATO forces, the already precarious Pakistan-Afghanistan relations went a notch higher because of the rise of terrorist groups through the attacks across the border and the establishment of an increased number of terror hideouts along with the Afghan side of the border. Along with these factors, the poor coordination between the Governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan further aggravated the situation. Popalzay (2024) rightly believes that insecurities within regions are not issues that can be dealt with independently by the individual governments since the internal issues within a country tend to overflow into the other.

The crisis was also entrenched by historical and structural issues between the two states. According to Mohammadi (2025) and Zazai (2025), the inefficiencies of state institutions in Afghanistan, weak leadership, ethnic division, and absence of public trust in Afghanistan government provided a chance to the Taliban to regain power nevertheless these failures also led to the emergence of room whereby extremist group could thrive, rather conspicuously alongside the Durand Line. As Ismail *et al.* (2025) observed that, in Pakistan, the robustness of the civilian institutions enabled the decision makers to act only marginally against these threats, due to the existence of corruption, the predominance of the military, and the exhaustively bureaucratic structures of these institutions. Other scholars such as Murtazashvili (2022) along with Açıkgöz *et al.* (2025) move further to demonstrate how the political anatomy of Afghanistan and ethnic wars in the country have directly boiled onto the security of Pakistan (the most egregious region of Pakistan being the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan).

The Taliban again did not only transform the political geography of Afghanistan but also revived the ancient partnerships among the armed groups. As is pointed out by Bakhsh, *et al.* (2024), the ideological and operational connections between the Afghan Taliban and the TTP have contributed to reorganization of its structure on Pakistani territory. In the meantime, the coordination between Pakistan and Afghanistan across the borders as well as in terms of intelligence-sharing remained quite poor. Abbas *et al.* (2025) observe that lack of mutual trust, breach of promises and ambiguous policies have so far eclipsed any substantial counterterrorism collaboration between the two strategically very important neighboring countries. Meanwhile the Durand Line has remained a soft border, easily allowing the movements of terrorists, planning as well as execution of attacks on either side across the border.

In view of the preceding discussion, it might be safely observed that, with a complex and perilous environment, it is the emerging crisis of national security that Pakistan is currently in. Although numerous studies were conducted internationally to analyze the causes of the rise of the Taliban or foreign policy failures of the U.S., but, not so many studies have concentrated on how the said changes influenced the internal peace and stability of Pakistan. In this perspective, the instant study fills that gap by focusing on Pakistan's security dynamics amidst the US withdrawal and applying such theories as the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) and Constructivism to answer the question of how and why the instability in Afghanistan directly affects Pakistan. This study claims to offer a better understanding and comprehension of the phenomena like terrorism, border conflict, and the future development of the regional cooperation in post-US withdrawal era.

2. Overview of the Taliban's Return to Power in August 2021

Murtazashvili (2022) believes that internal leadership failure rather than battlefield losses was a

major cause of the collapse of the Afghan Republic in August 2021. He states that political actors responded slowly, which provided the Taliban the opportunity to take control of power within a short period. Safi, *et al.* (2024) hold that the declining trust of the people in the national institutions had a significant contribution to the reemergence of the Taliban, since, it was the official complacency and not a military failure that enabled Taliban to make a comeback. Such views bring out the point that the August 2021 takeover was not merely a military conquest, but the component of indoor political rot, a disease that would later wreak havoc in Pakistan with the rekindling of militant threats and instability of the region.

3. Interlinked Security Environment of Afghanistan and Pakistan

Using the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), Popalzay (2024) demonstrates how the emergence of the Taliban resulted in increased security threats the Pakistan faces on its soil. He asserts that breakdown in diplomatic and security relationship between the two nations has given the breathing space to non-state actors such as the TTP, directly endangering the border provinces in Pakistan. Although Popalzay takes pains to highlight the theoretical connection between the regional insecurities, he is not at pains to examine the manner in which the security agencies within Pakistan are adapting with the new realities. This paper expands his contribution by assessing the role institutional reactions in Pakistan have played or other factors which led to the aggravation of the cross-border insurgency and stalemate in diplomacy.

4. Pakistan's Historical Involvement and Strategic Interests in Afghanistan

Mohammadi (2025) provides a critical insight into the process of democratizing Afghanistan after 2001, finding the absence of strong institutions, ethnic division, and distrust of democracy as the causes of the failure of the whole process. He goes on to indicate that such internal fiascoes provided conditions that led to the re-emergence of Taliban. Though Mohammadi concentrates on portraying the domestic picture of Afghanistan, the instant study widens the discussion to indicate how the same political inabilities facilitated the militant ideologies to cross the borders and penetrate into the surrounding Pakistan. Ideological defeat of the Afghan state, thus, did not stay within the limits of its own boundaries, but immediately threatened internal security and strategic depth of Pakistan.

5. Rise of TTP, IS-K, and Other Militant Threats

Bakhsh *et al.* (2024) infer that, after the US withdrawal, the potential threat was that the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) would also be rekindled due to the return of Taliban into power in Afghanistan. Their research shows that the TTP has taken the benefit of the ungoverned space in Afghanistan to reorganize, rearm and then carrying fresh attacks alongside the territory of Pakistan. The authors underline that such renewal was made possible by an ideological affinity as well as an operational backing by the Afghan Taliban. But they also claim that there has been, however, an inability on the part of the security establishment in Pakistan to develop such counterterrorism responses while moving beyond mere reactive policies. The authors further argue that the worsening border insecurity, intelligence-collection failure as well as operational challenges have accorded the TTP additional thrust leading to an increasingly deteriorating security situation in key provinces of Pakistan including Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan.

6. Political Instability and Cross-Border Attacks

Abbas *et al.* (2025) review the security relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan after the Taliban resurgence, especially across the Durand Line. The authors believe that there is a trust deficit and failure to establish a proper intelligence sharing mechanism which resulted in an escalation in proxy warfare. All these causes collectively turned the porous Pakistan-

Afghanistan border into a base point of militant invasions. Though the writers marked carrying out some common activities by both the neighboring states including collaborative interventions comprising raids and joint patrolling along with the borders, but observe that these collaborations are insufficiently coordinated and happen only sporadically.

The plan to withdraw U.S. forces from Afghanistan in August 2021 altered the domestic and regional security of Pakistan. The Taliban's recapturing of Afghanistan coupled with the collapse of U.S.-installed government in Kabul entailed the emergence of new uncertainties on the western border of Pakistan. Whereas some circles in Islamabad had hoped that an Afghanistan, led by the Taliban, would lead to the stabilization of borders but it was the other way round. The post-2021 security scenario has been marked by the continuity of cross-border attacks, the reinstatement of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and expansion of the Islamic State Khorasan Province (IS-KP) in the adjacent regions such as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. Hard and rocky land area in the Pakistan Afghanistan border and the question of ideology and brotherhood with the Afghanistan Taliban and the TTP germinated bitter and harsh border security problems to Pakistan.

In this respect, the instant study critically reviews the specifics of the counterterrorism and the border control policy that was shaped by Pakistan in the post-2021 scenario. It argues that the growth of cross-border militancy in Pakistan has been recorded since the fall of Kabul. The government of Pakistan had already successfully coped with the challenge of militancy through the military operation such as *Radd-ul-Fasaad* and *Zarb-e-Azb*, hence relied upon a fresher version labelled as *Operation Azm-i-Istehkam*. While opting for the military issue, institutional and diplomatic problems like failure in negotiations with TTP, low degree of coordination within the regime of the Afghan Taliban and non-realization of national security policy have also been given special consideration by the military establishment.

7. Geostrategic Importance of the Durand Line

The Durand Line has been one of the most complex and strategic lines in South Asia which was projected by the British colonial rule in 1893. Not only does it divide two modern states of Pakistan and Afghanistan, but also the ethnic groups of Pashtuns as a consequence, which leads to intensive historical, political, and security problems. Yar & Sadaat (2025), assume that the Afghanistan border had been alternating its shape as dictated by colonialism and local power politics. The writers term the border as a fake and artificial boundary which continued to impact the regional security on the long-term basis and had resulted in increasing instances of terrorism, smuggling, and illegal migration. Some scholars believe that the Durand Line has led to creation of a legal and diplomatic quagmire (Khan *et al.*, 2025). Pakistan considers it as a legacy of the British India and regards it as an internationally established boundary whereas Afghanistan does not support the legality of this border. It is due to these conflicting arguments, the border is vulnerable to infiltration of militants and warfare. The review of the past treaties and diplomatic history show that it was the mistrust that hurt the bilateral relations since the very independence of Pakistan in 1947.

In the security perspective of Pakistan, Kaleem (2025) lays down the importance of the Durand line. The evidence in his research shows that the open and insecure border has become the place of cross-border terrorism, illegal goods transportation and undesired reliefs for narcotics handlers. These issues pose a great danger to the domestic peace of Pakistan especially in the bordering provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. Despite initiating fencing process as well as stringent surveillance activities, there remained some serious loopholes as regards to border control. Tackling such threats is not an easy task because of lack of regular coordination between ruling authorities in Pakistan and

Afghanistan.

A more historical and cultural substance is given to it by Ali & Khan (2025) who mention the fact that the Durand Line also symbolizes the issue of Pashtun nationalism that has not been resolved till date. Majority of the ethnic Pashtuns believe that it draws up an imaginary line between them who speak the same language, share common culture, tradition and identity across the border. This has caused protests and even political opposition up to such extent which force Pakistan to tighten the security by fencing and foot patrolling. The authorities in Pakistan found that the opposition to Durand Line is not political only but too emotional on the basis of group identity and colonial outrage. Such sentiments complicate the task of state in managing security and in most of the cases, create loopholes which the insurgent groups are able to exploit by riding on ethnic grievances.

8. Evolution of TTP and IS-KP Activities since 2021

In August 2021, when the U.S. withdrew from Afghanistan, the security situation in Pakistan has reportedly become unstable in maximum ways and particularly due to Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) resurrection and increasing activities by Islamic State Khorasan Province (IS-KP). The resultant power vacuum in Afghanistan allowed various militant elements and groups to reassemble and restructure themselves in a manner that had given rise to a real threat of internal security and stability in Pakistan and the region.

According to Ullah *et al.* (2025), the possible increase in the bond between the ruling Taliban regime in Afghanistan and TTP is the major consternation that had been seen in Pakistan after the Taliban took power in Afghanistan. Pakistan feared that the Taliban regime in Kabul would set up an ideologically safe haven or passive reprieve to the TTP which had been organizing terrorist assaults on the Pakistani land. All that forced Pakistan not only to review its strategic position, but also as to seek to manage the balancing act between security threats at home, and regional diplomacy that, *inter alia*, included its complex relationship with China in the context of implementing the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects. So this instability as a sequel to the withdrawal process has hence re-shaped the regional dynamics meaning a re-alignment in securities leaving Pakistan more exposed to the greater cross-border militancy.

Siddiqui (2025) discovers that the problem is even more complex in Balochistan since the IS-KP has managed to cooperate with Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ). Not only has this alliance led to local security situation being aggravated but also that the Chinese investments in terms of BRI were revealed to be threatened. Siddiqui shows that this grouping was formulated under terms of ideological merge, penetration need in the organizations, mutual benefits referring to the choice of the state and foreign objects of attack. The result is a more networked and increased militant threat that appears to have IS-KP at the center of the action and that has the ability to project its force throughout the province. This constitutes a serious shift in the antecedent activities of IS-KP that denotes that the counterterrorism policies of Pakistan would have to be altered so as to cope with such accommodative militant behaviors.

Due to the rebirth of Taliban, the growth of religious extremism, the smuggling of drugs and the presence of non-state actors, the violence has also risen in the border areas of Pakistan such as former FATA and Balochistan. According to Khan & Ahmed (2025), these tendencies remind of the past experience regarding the first government that the Taliban introduced and imply that these areas will be extremely vulnerable to the development of transnational militancy. While examining the recent trends, the writers observe that the Taliban-controlled Afghanistan is now a safer heaven for the spillover of insurgencies with

direct impact on the internal consolidation and border security of Pakistan. The second useful information resource is the argument provided by Ali *et al.* (2025) that explains why Taliban was hesitant to muscle against the TTP.

They also indicate in their analysis that there is no possible cooperation/coordination between the Taliban-supported TTP and the security interests of the Pakistanis because of high ideological links that exist between the outfit and the Afghan Taliban. Moreover, any action against TTP will lead its members to drift towards IS-KP and this threatens even the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

This kind of foot-drag option has plunged Pakistan into its solitary orbit in the war against the TTP and the Taliban leadership also hope that it will utilize the TTP to Islamize the tribal area of Pakistan and establish its (Taliban's) influence beyond the Durand Line. Demonstrating a decisive turning point, the TTP and IS-KP operations have been observed not only to consolidate but also continued to increase in terms of numbers of attacks and intensity within Pakistan since the year 2021. The mixing of ideology in the militant circles, the lack of initiative among the Taliban to restrain them, and the shift in regional belonging have also caused the already worsening security situation to be further aggravated.

9. Taliban-TTP Nexus and Existence of Border Sanctuaries

Again, due to the tactical, ideological, and logistic support that the organization has received upon the Taliban returning to power in Afghanistan in August 2021, the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) poses a serious threat to the Pakistani national security. The living in symbiosis relationship between the two groups traditionally called the Taliban-TTP nexus has changed the security trends in the region since that has enabled TTP to have safe haven in the other side of the Afghanistan border. Ali *et al.* (2025) mention that the Taliban not only admitted the fact of existence of the TTP on the land of their country but they allegedly provided it with the shelter and the freedom of action. These are supply of weapons, training camps and recruitments, logistic and financial opportunities to TTP. The Taliban has faced the pressures of expelling or disarming the TTP and the regime has so far resisted to surrender before these pressures despite the heightened diplomatic pressure by Islamabad due to the vast ideological and brotherly relationships that existed between the two movements. It is this tactical marriage that has emboldened TTP to continue with their insurgent ambitions in Pakistan, pressing for the withdrawal of FATA-Khyber Pakhtunkhwa merger and demand the implementation of the Shariah law that challenge both territorial integrity and political sovereignty of Pakistan.

The implications of such violent alliance (i.e. the Taliban-TTP combination) with regard to the security in the region is very disconcerting as Daudzai & Yousaf (2025) estimate while taking into consideration the passivity of the Taliban in matters concerning transnational terror groups including TTP and the IS-KP. The writers believe that the formation of such a progressive alliance and their activities elevated the state of anxiety in South and Central Asia.

In particular, other countries in their vicinity, namely Pakistan, Iran and Russia remain in a constant fear of an attack by the militants. The same has caused dents over the decades-long foreign policy of Pakistan of considering Afghanistan as strategic depth as is highlighted by Guðmundsson (2025). The consideration that has worked against Pakistan however is in the fact that Pakistan had felt that it was a geopolitical success that they had won back the Taliban and especially by eroding the influence of India in Afghanistan. According to Ali *et al.* (2025), the ambitions of the Taliban to extend its influence to the Pashtun belt in Pakistan, not only pose a security threat, but also might be considered a geo-

political invasion. Taliban seem to be eyeing upon a bigger Islamic system and the tribal reconstruction of the regions in Pakistan that induce an image of fluidity of boundaries and movement of ideologies on either sides of the Durand Line.

Also, Rizwan & Ahmed (2025) focus on the fact that kicks up the silhouette of transnational terrorism that has been increased because of the permissive atmosphere established by the Taliban, brought about the renewal of the tensions that had already been existed in the region. This is especially Pakistan that has indicted the Taliban in harboring militants behind cross border incursions and, the Taliban top leadership deny the allegations or develop coyness on the same. This sort of charge and counter charge indicate the fact that terrorism has become a divisive line in diplomacy and this has ripped down relations between states in the region and prompted a tinge of mistrust that has rendered regional cooperation in the security sector to be extremely difficult.

It applies to the Taliban questions of internal rule as well. As Golishnikov (2025) notes that, despite an apparent power, which the Taliban can now command in Afghanistan, and the declining number of drugs, which come in or are manufactured in the country, the group is still not ready to commit to making serious counterterrorist commitments. Their strategy, in a nutshell, aptly called the RED Strategy (Recognition, Engagement and Deterrence) has not been fully implemented as yet as regards groups like the TTP. The Taliban, on the other hand, appear to be laying an egg-shell walk between the international community wishes and their own need to have something left on their table by coopting the militant partners and thus the regime appears to mislead the regional partners such as Pakistan. In conclusion, it is quite evident that the Taliban-TTP alliance has become one of the greatest threats to the stability of the regional security since 2021.

The encouragement by Taliban in terms of border hideouts and intellectual support has contributed immensely towards helping TTP mobilize and recover its ground in Pakistan, and has also weakened the security set-ups in the region. This coalition will continue to pose an additional threat to both the national stability in Pakistan and in South Asia unless an impervious inter-national and regional policy is attained combined with realistic diplomacy and counterinsurgency overhaul.

10. Pakistan's Border Fencing and Surveillance Responses

With the Taliban regime capturing control over Afghanistan in August 2021, the security threat is getting higher, hence Pakistan moved forward to transform the porous Durand Line into a highly monitored and barbered bordering zone. It is the transformation of security paradigm between a soft border and a hard security frontier as referred to in the article by Zada & Rahman (2025), who further believe that it is an attempt by Islamabad to have a tight control of militant penetration across the border as well as the control of movement of refugees in the country and also the control of its restive western frontier.

The fencing strategy of Pakistan is on the threshold of the fact that Pakistan has since times immemorial had to contain with terrorism in particular by militant outfits like the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) who have used the unexploited sections of its borders as launching pads. Weak governance and porous border have given the TTP the opportunity to reestablish its operations base in the recent past (Shah, 2025). The fencing project hence is not so much a security effort on the part of Pakistan but to reclaim the territory back into stabilization with the implementation of a physically fixed infrastructure and the surveillance machinery like check posts, movement sensors and biometric surveillance, etc. The plan is however not the simple and conventional one and universally acceptable. According to Ijaz & Tariq (2025) the wobbly condition in post-2021 Afghanistan and resentments in the KP local

areas have transformed the border region into a highly acerbic region because so far the efforts to fence the region have been received with resistance. The habitual dependence in the tribal people of crossing the border to trade, socialize or fulfill tribal obligations is broken thus bitterness and socio-political tensions germinated across the border. Furthermore, the case of Durand Line is a tricky one also because of its undefined limitation and presence of unresolved disputes on its currently existing position which created all the inconvenience to imposing cross-border laws for both Afghanistan and Pakistan and also offered insurance to rebels and smugglers who exploit the legislative gray zones in their favor.

Such hostilities on the border issue are even aggravated due to ethnic nationalism especially among the Pashtun communities. As Ali & Khan (2025) say, the demarcation of boundary without the engagement and the combat of the feelings of Pashtun nationality have increased the distance between the government and regional tribes. The Durand line has never been accepted whole quoted by the regimes of Afghanistan or even the Pashtun nationalists because they view the fence as colonial boundary and even a symbol of tyranny. As a result, the fencing programs which are being undertaken with the intentions of improving security have led to protests and cultivated sentiments of political marginalization especially in the communities that are located at the borders.

Besides, the media calls concerning the occupation of the border along with the propaganda by the Taliban regime have influenced the way individuals perceive the border policy adopted by Pakistan. Ashraf & Khan (2025) observe that the Pashtun journalists active on the two different sides of the border are being pressured in various ways. They are treading a ground in politics that is normally torn apart between nationalist discourse and an imposed state of security discourse. However, the reality of Pakistan's policy in fencing its borders can be found in the fact that getting rid of the cross-boundary terrorism, illegal immigration and smuggling that disturb the peace and stability of their nation is a major priority for the country which already has suffered a lot because of the US-led War Against Terror carried out after 9/11. It is noteworthy that a tougher border security setup would not deal with the root cause of the political/ethnic aggression in the region, but the fencing process would ought to be complemented by regional dialog, development schemes and inclusive governance in the border areas.

11. Conclusion

The forgoing discussion reveals that the post-2021 Pakistan case of border fencing and surveillance mission is a strategic move to take control of a feeble border that has never been anything more than pale. On the one hand, in the short-term scale, this resolution has the potential to create a positive impact on the sense of security; on the other hand, the long-term scale presupposes the need to resolve the ethnic, political, and diplomatic complexities surrounding the Durand Line. The fence may just go on to become a fence to militancy, other than simply peace, trust and regional integration, unless a fair mixture of security, engagement and regional co-operation is established.

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