

PAKISTAN - AFGHANISTAN RELATIONS: A TIMELINE OF TENSION AND TOLERANCE

Ever since the foundation of independent Pakistan in August 1947, the bilateral relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan have routinely been marred by disagreements and challenges emanating largely from the territorial disputes inherited from the era of British colonial rule.

Hossein Ebrahim Khani

Retired Ambassador

Associate Fellow, Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS), Tehran, Iran

Ever since the foundation of independent Pakistan in August 1947, the bilateral relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan have routinely been marred by disagreements and challenges emanating largely from the territorial disputes inherited from the era of British colonial rule. In May 1879 at the end of the first phase of the second Anglo-Afghan War, Mohammad Yaqub Khan, the Emir of Afghanistan, in accordance with the Treaty of Gandamak, ceded large parts of his territory to British India. In 1893 Abdur Rahman Khan, another Afghan ruler overwhelmed by the pressure from Britain had to yield to an imposed treaty that defined the areas of influence of Afghanistan and British India. By that, he also recognized the so-called Durand Line that stretched 2,440 km from the Afghanistan-China border in the Wakhan region to the intersecting point of Afghanistan, Iran, and British India borderlines in the West. Subsequently, this divider of spheres of influence earned the legitimacy of an international boundary and practically divided the large Pashtun-inhabited region better known as Pashtunistan between Afghanistan and British India. The intermittent and sporadic attempts by Afghans to retake the lost territory were of no avail in the face of Britain's political and military superiority and the vitality that the British were attaching to the preservation of the status quo in Afghanistan as a buffer zone needed to block the spread of Tsarist Russia's influence in their treasured colonial territory.

With the independence, the Afghan government eager to avail the opportune moment of the absence of the British might, Pakistan vigorously raised the issue of

what it described as unresolved border disputes carried over from the colonial era. Kabul branded the Durand Line as invalid and imposed-upon and called for negotiations with Pakistan on the demarcation of the new border. But the Pakistan-India dispute over the princely state of Kashmir right after the independence of both countries, the obvious inclination of Pashtun tribes towards Muslim Pakistan, and the subsequent mobilization and dispatch of tribal warriors to take back Kashmir from India, coupled with the desire of Pashtun tribal leaders to remain within the territory of Pakistan rather than accession to Afghanistan offered Pakistan a more superior position in the territorial dispute with Afghanistan.

Pakistan's outright rejection of Afghan demand and its reiteration of the legality of the Durand Line ushered in an era of relations characterized by mistrust and frequent tension between the two states. During the deliberations at the United Nations on Pakistan's application for membership in this organization, Afghanistan was the sole country to vote against Pakistan's admission. However, the delegate representing Afghanistan at the U.N. subsequently withdrew his country's objection and stated that he had voted against the resolution without receiving prior instruction from Kabul. In June 1949 in a major and historic development, the Afghan Loya Jirga (tribal assembly) unilaterally abrogated all those clauses of treaties concluded between the previous Afghan governments and British India that had lent credence to the Durand Line, pushing the strife with Pakistan to a new height.



The 1950-51 crackdown on some Pakistani Pashtun leaders opposed to the independence of Pakistan and the Durand Line left a number of Pashtun activists dead and their leaders jailed. The incident drew intensified verbal attacks from the Afghan government that accused Pakistan of mistreatment of ethnic Pashtuns. In response, the Pakistan government initiated its own official moves and media campaign against Kabul coupled with economic pressure by suspending the transit of gasoline and diesel imports from Afghanistan. This restrictive policy of Pakistan compelled Afghanistan to seek closer ties with the Soviet Union and to conclude agreements on the import/transit of fuel and export of goods that set the stage for greater Soviet influence in Afghanistan. Other retaliatory measures such as extending support and provision of a safe haven to the other side's opponents, sporadic border skirmishes together with diplomatic initiatives, and leveling charges became the routine agenda of the authorities of both nations that widened the extent of discontent and suspicion.

In 1952, the Afghan government aside from the usual calls for negotiations on the demarcation of the common border also laid the claim of sovereignty on the entire Baluchistan province of Pakistan. Referring to the North-Western Frontier and the Baluchistan provinces of Pakistan as the northern and southern Pashtunistan,

Kabul practically demanded the secession of nearly 60 percent of the Pakistani territory and its annexation to Afghanistan.

The March 1955 decision of the Pakistani government to merge the four western provinces into the provincial exclave of "West Pakistan" drew sharp criticism of the Afghan government. Kabul denounced the move as a measure to amplify repression of the Pashtun minority and did little to prevent mob ransacking of Pakistan's embassy in Kabul and its consulate in Jalalabad. The event in turn prompted retaliation in Pakistan by storming the consulate of Afghanistan in Peshawar and announcement of a decision to scale down diplomatic relations with Kabul and closure of Afghan and Pakistani consulates in both countries.

Pakistan's outright rejection of Afghan demand and its reiteration of the legality of the Durand Line ushered in an era of relations characterized by mistrust and frequent tension between the two states.

Although the two countries normalized diplomatic relations in 1957, the tense atmosphere in relations persisted. The policy pursued by the new Pakistan President Marshal Ayub Khan to further extend state influence and tighten control over tribal areas alongside Afghan Prime Minister Daoud Khan's attempts to follow suit in Pashtun-inhabited regions of Afghanistan added to the complexity of the issue. Failed January 1960 talks between Ayub Khan and the Foreign Minister of Afghanistan degraded the already deteriorated relations to the extent that the Afghan Foreign Minister explicitly slammed Pakistan as a colonial state. In the meantime, both countries beefed up their military capabilities along their shared border, and the ensuing severe armed clashes between the Pakistani and Afghan proxy forces in the Pashtun district of Bajaur cost the lives of hundreds of irregular fighters.

In August 1961, the government of Pakistan in response to what it called the harassment of Pakistani diplomats in Kabul and the restrictions imposed by the Afghan government, severed diplomatic relations with Afghanistan. Mediation efforts of Arab countries led by Saudi Arabia and the initiative of the then U.S. President Kennedy aimed at the revival of diplomatic ties between Pakistan and Afghanistan yielded no result. In 1962, the Shah of Iran visited Rawalpindi and Kabul, and succeeded in persuading the leaders at both capitals to narrow the gap of mistrust and to agree on mediated negotiations. In March 1963, Afghan and Pakistani delegations met in Tehran and agreed to restore diplomatic relations and to reopen their border crossings. Also during the India-Pakistan wars of 1965 and 1971, the Afghan King Mohammed Zahir Shah assured

Pakistani leaders that notwithstanding the unresolved territorial dispute, his country would not initiate military actions against Pakistan.

The 1973 return of Daoud Khan to power this time as the president of Afghanistan coincided with the dismissal of the elected provincial governments of North-West Frontier and Balochistan provinces by Pakistan Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, followed by a crackdown on the Baloch insurgency that resurfaced the chronic issue of Pashtunistan once again. It led to more deteriorated relations between the two countries and marked the beginning of a three-year period of verbal attacks, limited frontier skirmishes, and closure of border crossings. The 1976 negotiations between Bhutto and Daoud Khan eased tension to a great extent and helped prevail a short period of relative calm in Pak-Afghan relations.

In April 1978, leftist groups toppled the government of Daoud Khan. Nour Mohammad Taraki, the new Afghan president and leader of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, in an apparent bid to divert public attention from the communist nature of his government, declared that the Pashtunistan issue is the top priority of his administration. The Afghan delegate participating in the 1979 Non-Aligned Movement conference in Havana also raised the subject of Pashtunistan and deplored what he referred to as the Pakistani repression of ethnic Pashtuns and Islamabad's provocations and military aggression. With the rise of popular discontent over the communist coup, the entry of Soviet troops to save and support the Kabul administration, and the mass exodus of Afghan refugees heading to the neighboring countries,



Pakistan acted as the main conduit of Western support and supply to the mainly Pashtun-dominated Jihadi groups. To this end, the North-West Frontier Province in general and the city of Peshawar in particular transformed as the center for the presence and activities of seven major Afghan Mujahideen parties.

Although Pakistan benefited from Western attention and assistance in line with its alignment and resolute cooperation with the global alliance against Soviet military intervention and the communist establishment in Kabul, it suffered immensely from the social and security fallouts of its undeclared deep involvement in the Afghan conflict. Problems and social disorder associated with the influx of millions of Afghan refugees, the upsurge in activities of powerful drug cartels, widespread use of illegal firearms, the introduction of a phenomenon better known as 'Kalashnikov culture,' and finally, the eruption of bloody ethnic clashes between Pashtuns, Sindhi and Muhajir communities may be enumerated as Pakistan's share of offshoots of Afghan crisis with long-lasting adverse effects.

The Afghan government emboldened by the all-out backing of the Soviet Union felt little obstacle to react to what it used to brand as Pakistani interference. Acts of sabotage by elements affiliated with Kabul, frontier incursions, and the almost daily air space violations and bombing raids carried out by Afghan and Soviet jet fighters on the North-Western Frontier Province which they recognized as occupied Afghan territory became almost normal daily events. It continued until the conclusion of the Geneva Agreement and the departure of Soviet troops from Afghanistan and finally, the total collapse of the communist government in April 1992.

Notwithstanding the initial euphoric climate and optimism generated by the fall of the Najibullah government and the general expectation of an era of smooth Pak-Afghan ties, the evolving situation emanating from Pakistan's strategic objective of installing a Pashtun-dominated establishment in Kabul did not contribute to tension-free bilateral relations. Pakistan's backing of Pashtun Jihadi groups in their armed rivalry with the government of Tajik president Burhanuddin Rabbani, and most notably the all-out support to the Islamic Party headed by Golbuddin Hekmatyar to destabilize the new Afghan Government ignited a fresh round of civil war this time among Afghan mujahidin groups.

The disintegration of the Soviet Union and the birth of newly independent republics set in motion the US-backed idea of the construction of oil and gas pipelines from Central Asian sources to open seas via Afghanistan and Pakistan. Frustrated by the failure of Hekmatyar and his affiliates to dislodge the government of President Rabbani and eager to avail itself of this golden economic

With the rise of popular discontent over the communist coup, the entry of Soviet troops to save and support the Kabul administration, and the mass exodus of Afghan refugees heading to the neighboring countries, Pakistan acted as the main conduit of Western support and supply to the mainly Pashtun-dominated Jihadi groups.

opportunity, Pakistan embarked on the scheme of creating and supporting a more trusted armed group called Taliban capable of imposing central rule and a secured environment as the prerequisites for implementation of the ambitious project of Central Asia energy transit. Although Pakistan's well-planned venture progressed to a great extent and the Taliban ruled Kabul for almost five years until the events of September 11th, 2001, Pakistan's hope for a final settlement of the long-standing territorial dispute with Afghanistan and to earn an official recognition of the Durand Line by the Taliban government proved far from reality.

Pakistan's resolute support for the Taliban insurgency over the entire twenty-year period of the Afghan Republic is said to be responsible for the lingering instability and insecurity in large parts of Afghanistan in defiance of NATO's large-scale and costly military presence. Islamabad's policy and conduct during this period have always drawn strong protests from the Afghan government and elected Pashtun presidents, and have also caused severe discontent and outcry on the part of some notable Pashtun political figures and former warlords.

In 2017, the Pakistani government in a bid to further strengthen the legitimacy of the Durand Line initiated the costly project of setting up barbed wire fences and minefields along its shared border with Afghanistan in total disregard to official protests of the Kabul Administration. Facilitated by the prevailing unstable situation in Afghanistan and adhering to the justification of setting up barriers to prevent the infiltration of terrorist elements across the border, Pakistan succeeded in completing a major portion of the project by 2021.

The landlocked Afghanistan is mainly reliant on Pakistani transit routes for its import-exports and Pakistan's regulatory policies on this access in order to manage relations with Afghanistan have persisted as an irritant issue in its interactions with Kabul. Pakistan argues that a large portion of Afghan imports transited through its routes are smuggled and re-entered into Pakistan, thus dealing heavy blows to domestic

production and customs revenue. Persuaded in 2010 by the United States the Pakistan government entered into a new “Transit Trade Agreement” with Afghanistan that has eased the differences over transit issues to some extent. Some outstanding differences between the two countries, such as the presence of a large number of Afghan refugees in Pakistan and the fair distribution of waters flowing in frontier rivers have so far remained unattended.

The dramatic events of August 2021 leading to the collapse of the Ashraf Ghani government and the return of the Taliban to Kabul were at first glance seen as a historic triumph in the eyes of Pakistani leaders and generated a premature euphoria and optimism in Islamabad. Only days after the fall of the Afghan government, General Faiz Hamid the then-powerful head of the Inter Service Intelligence (ISI) of the Pakistan Army and his entourage triumphantly visited Kabul signaling a great accomplishment for his country against all odds. Pakistan spearheaded a diplomatic campaign to persuade other states to officially recognize the Taliban government and its admission into the United Nations. However, as predicted by many independent observers and scholars, the Pakistani euphoria proved to be very short-lived and soon Pakistan found itself in a self-made difficult situation and at loggerheads with its own once-proxy. Open opposition of Taliban to border fence installation efforts of Pakistan and even the removal of the already installed barriers in some sensitive portions of the Durand Line accompanied with the ensuing limited armed clashes gradually turned into normal recurrence. The policies and domestic conduct of the Taliban against the civil liberties and rights of the population along with the deteriorated economic and humanitarian situation further alienated a major portion of Afghan society and multiplied the number of Afghan refugees leaving the country. These developments coupled with the refusal of the Taliban to abide by their previous consent with the tenet of the Doha Agreement and the formation of a broad-based government denied it of International diplomatic recognition even from their sole resolute backer.

The worst for Pakistan occurred in 2022 with the re-emergence of Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistani (TTP), the

Pakistani version of Afghan Taliban that for the large part has been forced to dormancy by the military crackdown of Pakistan Army as well as denial of safe haven in Afghanistan due to NATO presence and lack of support from Afghan governments. The terrorism waged by TTP has grown in strength, extent, and frequency and has turned into a major security concern of Pakistani leaders at a critical juncture of facing economic difficulties and domestic political crises. Though the Taliban has repeatedly refuted Islamabad’s claims of the existence of TTP bases and sanctuaries on Afghan soil and of infiltration of TTP operatives from its shared border with Pakistan, there are fewer reasons to lend credit to the Taliban narrative given the realities on the ground. For Taliban leaders, having received support and shelter from TTP during the two decades of armed insurgency and in line with Pashtun tribal traditions and ideological considerations it is quite difficult to turn their back on the TTP and comply with the demands of Islamabad. Non-resolution of the TTP-related security issues with the Taliban administration and the ensuing exchange of threat and sharp criticisms has recently pushed the Pakistan government to resort to unprecedented restrictive measures against the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan highlighted by the decision to deport the large population of undocumented Afghan refugees and migrants.

Despite the changes in regional and international situation, Pakistan still regards Afghanistan as its political and security backyard and is constantly preoccupied with what it considers as the serious threat of Indian influence and presence in that backyard. As such, Pakistan shall spare no effort to undermine and oppose any Afghan government that forms a strong friendship and favor with New Delhi.

Pashtuns known as the largest ethnic group and the claimant of the lion’s share of political power in Afghanistan have always, except for a brief period, retained control of the government in Kabul. For Pashtuns, the conviction to safeguard this self-projected right to rule remains well associated with upholding the cause of unification of the divided Pashtuns inhabited areas on both sides of the Durand Line, thus leaving less optimism for a future compromise and fair settlement of territorial dispute with Pakistan.

Notwithstanding all the deep-rooted and chronic differences between Pakistan and Afghanistan, leaders of the two nations have until recently always exercised restraint at critical junctures and through last-minute contacts and negotiations have averted full-blown conflicts with unpredictable consequences. In view of the apocalyptic mindset of top Taliban leaders and their unique approach to domestic governance and international relations, it is yet to be seen if the last trend of displaying wisdom and moderation in tackling the disputes with Pakistan sustains or else.

Notwithstanding all the deep-rooted and chronic differences between Pakistan and Afghanistan, leaders of the two nations have until recently always exercised restraint at critical junctures and through last-minute contacts and negotiations have averted full-blown conflicts with unpredictable consequences.