

HARD AND SOFT BORDER PARADIGMS: A CASE STUDY OF PAK-AFGHAN BORDER MANAGEMENT

Sherin Zada	Ph.D. Scholar, Department of Political Science and International Relations, Qurtuba University of Science & Information Technology sherinzada333@gmail.com
Dr. Aziz Ur Rahman	Associate Professor, Department of Political Science and International Relations, Qurtuba University of Science & IT, dr.azizku@gmail.com

Abstract: *Pakistan, located at the crossroads of rich cultures and civilizations, geographically positioned in a perfect but politically complex region, has been in a constant state of turmoil, due to one or the other reason. Pakistan's internal and foreign policies have been driven by the transnational actors, both regionally and internationally, at times with a heavy cost for her territorial integrity and internal stability. Border issues, almost on all sides specially both eastern and western, have become enormously perplexing as the neighbors are not on soft standings with Pakistan. This paper focuses on border management of Pakistan with her western neighbor Afghanistan, with its plausible rationale for walling the border and its desired results. The shift from a soft and porous border to a hard border mechanism will be discussed in detail. The paradigm shift in the region with its tentative effects in future will also be brought under study. The paper will be concluded with certain viable policy options and recommendations.*

Keywords: Hard Borders, Soft Borders, Border Management, Paradigm Shift.

Introduction

Pakistan and Afghanistan, despite sharing a rich cultural heritage, close religious bonds, historical empathy, geographical proximity, relatively higher level of sectarian and ethnic homogeneity, and above all intimate but complex degree of political and socio-economic interdependence, have been at odds with each other for several decades. "Islamabad-Kabul ties have suffered many tremors of high intensity which occasionally led to cessation of the Pak-Afghan border (Rehman, 2018). The bilateral relations have seen different and divergent contours throughout the history. Despite repeated endeavours, relations have never come to soft terms with each other except for few intervals. Prevailing anti-Pakistan and anti-Afghanistan feelings across the borders, both the states have been in a perpetual state of tension and escalation especially in the post 9/11 era. The post 9/11 scenario brought unprecedented changes in foreign policy initiatives of both the states. Moreover, U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan has also left both the states in a state of shock and uncertainty.

Pak- Afghan relations have been marred by a number of issues like border dispute, refugees' influx, terrorism, smuggling, narcotics business, and above all cross-border movement of communities living on both sides of the border. To begin with, all these issues have been, in one way or the other, escalated by a long porous border between the two states. "Pakistan shares 2640 kilometers long border with Afghanistan, extending over a rugged and arid mountainous region from the Srikol Range in the North to the Kohi Sia Malik Range at Iranian border in the Southwest (Rizvi, 1971). The origin of all outstanding issues remained at the heart of this loose border mechanism, which has not been resolved

so far. Apart from the other issues related to cross border movement, the major concern has been the unrestricted and unchecked movement of terrorists, which has caused tremendous internal security problems for both the states. Owing to this, the Pakistani government decided to focus on the border management through fencing with Afghanistan and has started to fence this long border. In June 2016, Pakistan publicized afresh border undertakings to address the issue of movement from cross the border, restraint unregulated and unlawful cross-border activities for enhancing peace and security (Khan, 2017).

Hard and Soft Border Paradigms

Border is governed by prioritizing state security by putting military force forward. This is known as hard border paradigm. Hard border paradigm is an approach which emerges from Westphalian State concept of 1648 (Okhonmina, 2017). Borders define the exclusive territorial supremacy of a state over its geographical area and people within that area (Anderson, 1996). Soft border, on the contrary, is the modern phenomenon which has surfaced on the international scene out of the concept of globalization and greater interdependency of states. Globalization has also reinvigorated the idea of soft border paradigm in international discourse which emphasizes cross border undertakings. Borders are converting into more flexible line of contact and communications for the movement of people, goods, capital, services, information and technology (Nadlirotul Ulfa, 2018). The choice between the hard and soft border paradigm is largely dependent upon the nature of relationship between the two states. Although, in modern literature on international relations, hardly any state has elapsd the influence of globalization and soft border mechanism, nevertheless, there are states which have followed the *Berlinic* view of their borders in relationship to their immediate neighbors (Friedman, 2011).

Pak-Afghan border has been on the line of soft border paradigm per force as these two states are sharing a 2640 kilometers long porous border with two hundred and thirty five (235) crossing points (Bagash, 2024). Pak-Afghan border has been one of the trafficked borders witnessing an unmatched and unmonitored movement of around 50,000 to 60,000 people daily, with almost 90 % of the influx originating from Afghanistan into Pakistan (Akhlaque, 2013). Nevertheless, since the inception of Pakistan in 1947, however, the Afghan government has never accepted the border and Pakistan too has shown enormous level of flexibility under the concept of “strategic depth” vis-à-vis Indian threats on the eastern border. However, in the post 9/11 scenario, American attack on Afghanistan, increased volume of cross-border terrorism, and internal threats along with the shedding sovereignty of Pakistan, the soft border paradigm is giving way to hard border paradigm. Pakistan has started to wall the border under the National Action Plan of 2015 to curb the cross-border movement of terrorists as well as illegal immigrants and traders. Change in the paradigm is because the border management has become central as it is associated to state governability (Nadlirotul Ulfa, 2018).

Why a Paradigm Shift from Soft to Hard Borders?

Owing to the long history of seven decades of soft borders between Afghanistan and Pakistan, the rationality is needed for this sudden but costly project undertaken unilaterally by Pakistan, despite opposition from Afghanistan and lack of cooperation from the international community, especially the United States of America which has always had the grumble of cross-border movement of terrorists. Notwithstanding rigidities on the border stemming from Kabul, Islamabad is resolute to take steps to meritoriously secure its side of the border. Pakistan has, consequently, started phased fencing of its border with Afghanistan in Khyber Pakhtoonkhwa (1,230km) and Baluchistan (1,381km) provinces (Abbas, 2017). Approximately, 900 kilometer fencing was completed by January 2019 and work on the rest was underway (Khan, 2019). Around 85% of the borer fencing has been completed by December 2024 (Bai et al., 2024).

Pakistan went for this inflated and unilateral project because of its shedding territorial sovereignty due the frequent American Drone attacks on the plea of presence of “safe heavens” of terrorists in former

Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). From January 2011 to January 2019, for example, there have been 199 definite drone strikes on Pakistan territory by American led forces, which not only transgressed the territorial integrity of Pakistan but also left Islamabad with no option to close the border (Saeed, 2019). These drone attacks have not only compromised the territorial integrity of Pakistan but has also led to an increased pressure on the political and military planners for countering these attacks. Pakistan, though, repeatedly sought the cooperation of America and Afghan government for sealing the border but with no effects. Fencing alone remained as the last resort and viable option for Pakistan.

Americans, followed by Taliban (terrorists from both sides), and the Afghan forces' consistent infiltration and attacks on Pakistani forces and civilians also forced Pakistan to take this bitter and *ex parte* decision to close this border. Kabul's unwillingness to cooperate with Pakistan on the issue of terrorism despite repeated commitment on the part of Islamabad, left Pakistan with no other option than shifting to hard border paradigm. Nonetheless, it seems to be more of *ex parte* exertion by Pakistan. Apparently, Kabul's unwillingness to go for 'joint operations' across the border is obvious from its rising levels of violence and unwillingness towards stringent border management; while Islamabad has already taken strong steps along its border, demonstrated through the reduction in violence and terrorist attacks in Pakistan (Khan, 2017).

The prolonged war on terror launched by the United States and her allies has proved to be very expensive in terms of economic cost, human casualties, longevity, and above all blurred lines of victory in war. The international community is now ready to withdraw from Afghanistan, leaving the affairs in its incomplete state. Pakistan, having had the experience of post-USSR withdrawal scenario, is not unmindful of the onslaught of instability horizons in the region. With such a soft and porous border, Pakistan may become the real post-war frenzy for both the non-state actors as well as Afghan forces. In the post U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan scenario, the key challenge to Pakistan has been from the militant groups associated or like-minded to *Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)* (Hasrat, 2014). Having such a scenario, Pakistan stance is pre-emptive in nature to counter future occurrences.

The issue of ethnic divide of Pakhtoon speaking majority areas on both sides in the form of Durand Line has been a burning and most debated subject. Both the states have been at dagger drawn with each other since 1947, after the independence of Pakistan. It has been the cherished desire of Afghan governments to have control of the majority Pashto speaking tracts of Pakistan (Rehman, 2018b). Although this stance of Afghanistan has never got any support internationally as well as domestically, still Afghanistan has been adamant in supporting the nationalist inside Pakistan to promoting the cause of "Pakhtoonistan" (Rehman, 2018b). Recent resurgence of *Pashtoon Tahaffuz Movement (PTM)* from FATA is increasing Islamabad's concerns related to the future contours of ethnic politics in the region ignited by Afghanistan. Peeping into future, Pakistan is regressing to hard border paradigm.

Pakistan, in the post-independence era, faced tremendous security hazards from its eastern neighbor – India. Pakistan needed safe security environment on its other borders, specifically on western borders which is quite long to be managed in case of any aggression. There the idea of strategic depth came in. Strategic depth, militarily, is a jorgan associated to the internal distance within the territory of a state distancing the frontline to its center of gravity or Heartland, its dense populace or significant metropolises or manufacturing setting (Jamil, 2017). Pakistan's policy towards Afghanistan has been formulated on the principles of strategic depth, which in reality has never been earned. But this concept has gone outdated as well as immaterial after Pakistan's nuclear capability regime. In the post nuclear capability posture of the state, the idea of strategic depth has proved immaterial for Pakistan (Jamil, 2017). With this Pakistan can derail herself from the conventional dependency approach of strategic depth to convert its porous border into hard one.

Pak-Afghan border has proved to be a hunting ground for smuggling and illegal activities. Pakistan provides is a transit, the ultimate land for drugs and forerunner substances. It is also a transit, source

and destination country for trafficked persons and smuggling of migrants. This illicit traffic in narcotics and human beings poses significant challenges to border management, a critical issue for economic development and national security (UNDC, 2019). Starting from expensive vehicles, to electronics, textiles, weapons, drugs and narcotics, and even daily use items are smuggled through this porous border. 95% of the vehicles in FATA, Malakand Division, Gilgit-Baltistan, Queta, and Chaman region are non-custom paid (NCP) vehicles (Shafiq, 2023). Similarly, 60-70 % weapons, mostly foreign made, used and traded in KPK and Baluchistan are smuggled through Pak-Afghan border (Ahmed, 2023). More than 40% of residents of FATA and Baluchistan are dependent on Pak-Afghan illegal trade. Similarly, 40 % of drugs used in Peshawar and ultimately emanating into rest of Pakistan is coming through Afghanistan. Annual loss of \$ 3 billion vis-à-vis \$ 1.2 billion official trade, coupled with culture of illegal activities and internal security issues, Pakistan's policy of paradigm shift makes sense (Paracha, 2017).

Pakistan has been hosting more than 3.5 million Afghan refugees since 1979 in the backdrop of former Soviet Union's aggression against Afghanistan. These refugees, in one way or the other, have not only become an economic burden on the exchequer of Pakistan, but at times have posed serious security threats as well. The return process of these refugees is foiled by this porous border as they have settled businesses and families in Pakistan. Once returned, they can easily cross the border illegally. Similarly, any future eventuality inside Afghanistan can also give impetus to refugee influx into Pakistan, which the later cannot afford with the prevalent security environment and economic conditions. All these factors together, left Pakistan with no other option except closing and fencing its soft border.

Challenges to fencing the Border

Pak-Afghan border has been the bone of contention between the two states and so far, no flexibility has been demonstrated on both sides regarding its settlement. In the post-9/11 scenario, when Afghanistan and America blamed Pakistan for increased cross-border movement of terrorists, Pakistan repeatedly sought the assistance of both Americans and Afghans for effective border management but with no success. Several options have been explored and tabled for the management of the border; nonetheless, rein holders in Afghanistan have not consented to these. There thus emerges a contradiction in the position taken by the Afghans. On the one hand, while authorities of Afghanistan maintain the Durand Line as dividing line for families along the borders, yet they persistently blame Pakistan for intrusion, support for the miscreants and terrorists across the borders (Khalid, 2020). This non-cooperation is one of the major hurdles in resolving the border issue as well as border fencing.

Insecure borders of Pakistan have not deviated Islamabad to be insensitive to its territorial sovereignty, despite huge economic pressures. The vigilant stance of Pakistan has made defence of state the top most priority in national planning. Conventionally the magnitude of border security always remained tilted towards the defence of Eastern borders (with India). Afghan border got more significance in the backdrop of long-term American presence in the region as well as her non-cooperation, Pakistan's vulnerability to cross border terrorism, persistent Afghan government non-supportive posture, closer Indo-Afghan nexus, growing regional trade prospects, and above all vanishing concept of strategic depth of Afghanistan. Though costly in monetary terms but Pakistan has been forced to undertake the project keeping in view the political and strategic challenges as well prospects. The official estimate of the project is over \$ 550 million which may increase if not completed in time, keeping in view depreciation and fragile economic conditions (ISPR, 2021). Funding such projects are bringing huge financial pressure on public exchequer yet needed to be undertaken which is a tangible challenge for Pakistan.

Pak-Afghan imbroglio over border issues has always brought tremendous difficulties for border communities as they have already been divided. Divided tribes and families reside on both sides of the border and synthetic fences would divide them additionally. This has led to increased trepidations of border communities on Pakistani side which needs to be catered for. Also, fencing may devoid

Islamabad of people to people contact diplomacy as well as growing concerns in border communities. Although, no such voice is raised vehemently so far, nevertheless, their interests and dependency on Afghan people as well as business opportunities may pose a challenge to Pakistan border management commitment. The rise of *Pashtoon Tahhafuz Movement* (PTM) might be viewed from the prism of border communities' growing concerns as well as their vulnerabilities to such elements being used against Pakistan. Marginalized as already they are, fencing of border may bring more challenges for them as well as Pakistan.

Pak- Afghan relations have always been centering on the non-state actors in the form of illegal refugees, transnational terrorists, smugglers, and trade mafias. All these elements, in one way or the other, have influenced the internal security and political environment within Pakistan. According to a USIP paper, the Pashtuns and the Baloch residents of Pakistan, earn huge amount of their revenue from cross-border smuggling. This is because of the great permeable border and people of similar ethnic group straddle along the borders. The borderlands already have become a large bridge for the criminal (drugs) and criminalized (transit trade) economies of the region (Khalid, 2020). Roughly assessed about 200 buses, 300 mini buses, 100 trucks, 100 Mazda vans, 200 pick-up vans, 200 taxis and one train are used for daily commuting people between Quetta and Chaman. Around 25,000 people are associated with such commercial activities earning about 720 million rupees per year. This implies that a sizeable network of smugglers and illegal activists is existing in the area (Sharif, 2000). Fencing the border has strong resistance from these elements. This alone shows how much loss to the public exchequer takes place on annual basis. These mafias will surely support all those elements who try to sabotage the fencing process. These mafias have become a tangible challenge to Pak-Afghan border management process.

Effective Border Management – A way forward

Border management between Afghanistan and Pakistan is based on US-Mexican model where United States has fenced the border to control the influx of illegal goods and personnel. Fencing Pak-Afghan border, however, is not as easy as it seems to be. It is one of the costliest projects as 1 kilometer of fencing costs Pakistan almost Rs. 1 million (Shinwari, 2018). Since it has been started due to American concerns of cross-border movement of terrorists, Americans should be convinced diplomatically to support this project towards its culmination. Pakistan has been a facilitator in US-Taliban negotiations, it is pertinent to demand Americans to support border management initiatives. Again, Afghan government has not accepted the fencing on the plea of dispute over Durand Line Agreement, Americans' support is necessary for influencing Afghan government to border management process, for peace and stability inside Afghanistan and outside at the regional level. An inclusive approach with reference to the United States and Afghanistan will further ease the fencing process.

Fencing process alone cannot resolve the issue of cross border movement and ultimately reduce the issue of terrorism. It has to be followed by a stringent legal regime to deal with transgressors so that the real purpose of closing the border is achieved. Centuries' long culture of institutional redundancy on border has to be addressed so that the very purpose of fencing the border is not compromised. Fencing of border must be reinforced by internal security apparatus in terms of legal code to be followed in true letter and spirit. It is now time to develop a culture of obedience to law through rigorous institutional framework. Fencing and border management cannot succeed unless it is supported by internal security regime. Again, the law should also move against the illegal refugees who become the source of cross border movement. Crackdown is mandatory against such refugees and illegal foreigners.

Border management is the framework for the security of a state. It is the mechanism for the territorial integrity of state and her exclusive sovereign right to manage it as per law and free choice. It, nevertheless, should not neglect the welfare of border communities as an element of human security. In case of Pak-Afghan border communities, it is not only the case of financial or economic interests, rather it involves the emotional legacy as well. Most of the families across the borders have strong family

relationships and fencing may further intensify the feelings of estrangement already divided by Durand Line. Closing the borders must not be equated to closing the eyes from the welfare of border communities. The most feasible way to address the marginalized communities' interest, a special mechanism must be developed to ensure the frequent interaction of families within a legal framework. To better look after the border communities, and pacify the emotional inflammation, economic tools must be used by both the states. Creating employment opportunities, through economic zones and increased legal trade activities may convert the closed border into a great economic frenzy for the border communities. Welfare of border communities may further reinforce the border management.

Conclusion

Border management between Pakistan and Afghanistan has been an outstanding issue since the birth of Pakistan. Islamabad and Kabul have never agreed on any unanimous agreement as far as the issue of border is concerned. Despite repeated political and diplomatic efforts, the issue remained unresolved and the *status quo* remained intact. However, the scenario changed in the post-9/11 era and the tribal region and borderland posed serious threats to Pakistan. The Pashtun tribal belt previously called Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA) has been a security challenge persistently for officials in Islamabad. Stretching over hundreds of kilometers, with rough hilly topography, the region has for decades been a hotbed of arms and other illegal activities. The area has also been a tricky point for U.S drone strikes against militants like *Al Qaeda* and other groups (Paliwal, 2017). Beginning with the dead issue of Paktoonistan, funding and manning terrorist organizations inside Pakistan, cross border movement of terrorists, supporting smuggling mafias, and the shedding sovereignty of Pakistan, Islamabad has been forced to fence and close the border. This, nevertheless, should be converted into an opportunity by both the states as a political, legal, diplomatic, and sovereign framework in the making through this closely monitored border management. Sharing a multitude of realities in the form of socio-political and strategic proximity, Pak-Afghan border is one of those realities. Denying it may not be productive rather it may be counter-productive for both the states. Border management is, perhaps, the only option to move ahead of the current but longstanding imbroglio over border as, border is produced and reproduced by regime (Nadlirotul Ulfa, 2018).

Border fencing is not a novel idea. States have practiced it the world over throughout history, starting from Berlin Wall, to U.S-Mexican border, and to modern European Brexit dynamics. In recent years, numerous populist world leaders have supported the idea of building walls to restrain the influx of immigrants, most notably U.S. President Donald Trump, who envisions a wall along the U.S. border with Mexico (Marshal, 2015). Hungarian right-wing Prime Minister Viktor Orban recently put up a fence along the border with Serbia to prevent Syrian refugees and other Muslim migrants from entering the East European country, which serves as a gateway to the European Union. Pak-Afghan border management should be viewed from the transnational perspective of controlling the unchecked but perilous free movement of those who not only challenge the security of these two states but the region as a whole. Fencing the border should be capitalized on as an opportunity for looking forward to the stability of the region and exploring more opportunities within the contours of legal framework. Fencing the border is a way forward not a step backward if considered pragmatically. In the overall perspective, the Pak-Afghan border should be viewed as a source of realistic benevolence and an optimistic leverage by both the states – especially in the people's context – rather than making it as a tool or ploy for conflict fermentation.

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