

Pashtun Nationalism and Cross-Border Politics: A Historical and Political Study of the Durand Line Dispute

Hajira M Ali	Phd. Scholar International Relations, NUML Islamabad hajrawisal03@gmail.com
Dr. Abdul Rehman Khan	Academic and Development Practitioner. arkhan.uw@gmail.com
Dr. Akash Khan	Lecturer, Bacha Khan University Charsadda. akashkhanndu@gmail.com

Abstract: *There is still no solution to the Durand Line dispute between Afghanistan and Pakistan, which Nevertheless Appalls Many, as it is tied to older colonial times and the issue of ethnicity. In 1893, British colonial authorities set up the boundary, dividing the Pashtuns, who inhabit both sides, which has caused ongoing political and social problems. It looks into the background of the Durand Line, the history of Pashtun nationalism, and the way border contests are affecting this area now. Because of shared Pashtun language, culture, and traditions, Pashtun nationalism opposes the Durand Line and calls for greater political recognition and independence. Having a porous border increases concerns about security, helps militant groups cross, and adds challenges to controlling what's happening within the state. Pakistan's work on security, such as fencing the border, has caused protests from Afghanistan and the Pashtun people. India, the United States, China, and Iran have geopolitical issues in the region that affect the Gulf dispute. It proves that through sharing dialogue, valuing all identities, and working together at the border, long-term problems can be solved. Using nationalism, colonialism, and security as examples, the article discusses possible steps that could help achieve peace in the unstable border zone.*

Keywords: Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nationalism, CPEC, China

Introduction

Among the geopolitical issues in South Asia, the Durand Line dispute between Afghanistan and Pakistan has lasted for a long time. This about 2,670-kilometer border was drawn by Sir Mortimer Durand and Amir Abdur Rahman Khan in 1893 to divide the exerted influence between British India and Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the line that passes through Pashtun territory has remained a source of conflict and continues to affect politics, culture, and security in the area today (Wikipedia, 2025).

At the main level, the Durand Line dispute cannot be separated from the aspirations and heritage of the Pashtun people, who live on both sides of the border. People of the Pashtun ethnic group, which is which is spread across Afghanistan and Pakistan, use the same language, Pashto,, and are influenced by the age-old code of Pashtunwali. Because of the Durand Line's imposition in colonial times, these communities were separated,, which interfered with their trade, family ties,, and culture. The colonial boundary was created without the approval or real involvement of the indigenous people,, which caused long- long- lasting anger among them (Dupree, 1973).

The Durand Line was decided as the official border after Pakistan's independence in 1947, but that

decision was rejected by Kabul. Both branches of Afghanistan's government believed the border line split the traditional homeland of the Pashtun tribe and did not properly respect Afghanistan's sovereignty. This stance resulted in many years of diplomatic conflicts and sporadic border skirmishes between Afghanistan and Pakistan (South Asian Voices, 2023).

The issue of the Durand Line goes past just questions of territory and affects politics. Because of its roots in ethnic identity and old grievances, Pashtun nationalism has gained importance in the politics of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Many people fighting for Pashtun autonomy make the Durand Line stand for the injustice of colonial rule and the ongoing marginalization of Pashtuns. Abdul Ghaffar Khan and organizations like the Khudai Khidmatgar have consistently advocated for Pashtun unity through nonviolent tactics, while today, groups such as the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) continue to push for changes in Pakistan's political and human rights policies (Tahir-Kheli, 1975; Shah & Khan, 2020).

Because the border is loosely guarded, regional security gets more complicated. Militant groups easily exploit the Pashtun tribal areas along the Durand Line due to the weak government and rugged terrain. For the TTP, the Taliban, the Iban, and many armed groups, the borderlines are used for movement, recruiting, and providing logistics, which undermines peace in both Afghanistan and Pakistan (International Crisis Group, 2022).

Since 2017, Afghanistan and local Pashtun tribes have opposed Pakistan's move to fence the border and add new physical barriers, as they feel these restrict their traditional movement and rights to certain territories (Al Jazeera, 2024). As a result, the relationship between Australia and Western Sahara has deteriorated, leading to increased anger among the local population.

This paper examines the history and politics surrounding the boundary in detail by discussing its origins, the rise of Pashtun nationalism, and the issues caused by political actions across the border. It notices how colonial impacts, ethnic backgrounds, and international political interests matter in the dispute, as well as the current security situation tied to terrorism and border management.

It demonstrates that encouraging all groups to be included in solving problems and cooperating at borders is an important way to achieve peace and stability in the area. It is very important for policymakers to be aware of Pashtun viewpoints and the circumstances around the Durand Line to address this long-lasting dispute and its wider effects in South Asia.

History of the Durand Line

In 1893, when Britain and Russia were competing fiercely for power in Central Asia, the Durand Line was drawn, which is often called "The Great Game." To protect its interests in India, Britain tried to defend its borders from Russia and keep a buffer zone in Afghanistan, a land between Russia and India (Hopkirk, 1992).

A boundary agreement was negotiated between Sir Mortimer Durand, the British diplomat and foreign secretary in India, and Amir Abdur Rahman Khan, who was known as "The Iron Amir" of Afghanistan. As a result, the Durand Line showed where Britain's influence ended and Afghanistan's started, but it was not clear what political status the Pashtun tribes would have on either side. Although these tribes were allowed their own way, the deal largely put large regions of what is now the northwest frontier of Pakistan under British control (Dupree, 1973).

While the Amir was involved in the arrangement, the Durand Line was mainly put in place without regard for the opinions of local Pashtun tribes, many of whom felt self-reliant and had strong family, social, and economic links in the region. Not including Afghan officials in these decisions contributed to later disputes (Saikal, 2012).

The Durand Line was initially intended not for strict political separation, but to delineate the boundaries of imperial influence. However, the actual experience of the healthcare system differed significantly

from what was anticipated. Pashtun tribes chose to disregard the border and community movements, leading to ongoing trade and tribal gatherings. Because Pashtunwali was often self-ruled by local networks, governments found it difficult to keep influence in the area (Siddiqi, 2007).

Amir Abdur Rahman Khan agreed to accept the Durand Line because it supported his rule against ongoing dissent and chances of foreign attack. However, many Afghans believed that the agreement violated the promises made regarding Pashtun unity and Afghan independence. This belief appeared regularly in Afghan politics, mainly when British India fell in 1947 and Pakistan was established (Dupree, 1973).

The Durand Line After Colonial Rule

When British India was split in two, Pakistan acquired the Durand Line as their western border. Islamabad acknowledged the border line with Afghanistan, but Afghanistan rejected it and kept claiming the parts of Northwestern Pakistan considered Pashtun. As a result of this claim, Pakistan and Afghanistan regularly faced diplomatic problems because Afghanistan supported Pashtun nationalist groups that tried to challenge Pakistan's authority (Grare, 2006).

Disputes over Pashtunistan increased between the two nations during the 1950s and 1960s, leading Pakistan to close its side of the border in 1961 for several years. Afghan involvement in supporting insurgent groups in Pakistan further exacerbated the problems, indicating that the Durand Line was not only a border issue but also a focal point for external conflicts (Rubin, 1995).

Afghanistan's importance in geopolitics rose when the Soviet Union invaded in 1979. The Afghan refugees were welcomed by Pakistan, which also trained and backed the mujahideen. As a result, Pakistan made significant efforts to secure the border and manage the movement of Pashtun people between the two countries, which complicated the role of the Durand Line as a boundary (UNHCR, 2025).

Important Recent Changes and the Border Fence

Since 2017, Pakistan has been attempting to construct a physical fence along the Durand Line to prevent unauthorized crossings, smuggling activities, and the movement of militants. Barbed wire and advanced surveillance, added to the fence, mean a clear move away from the open border regime of before (Wikipedia, 2025).

Officials from Afghanistan and Pashtun tribes have been protesting against the fence, asserting that it violates their long-standing right to move freely and negatively impacts their culture and community gatherings. The government of Kabul has stated that unilaterally building a fence is just adding to the dispute and could harm peace in the region (Al Jazeera, 2024).

In spite of negotiations to control these disputes, the border is still a scene of military conflicts, showing the lasting impact of old colonial divisions and unfulfilled national goals.

Development of Pashtun Nationalism: Role in Identity and Political Groups

Ethnic and Cultural Pillars of Pashtun Identity

Pashtuns are mostly found residing in southeastern Afghanistan and northwestern Pakistan; they are from the Indo-Iranian group. In Afghanistan, they constitute the biggest ethnic group, and they also form a significant minority in Pakistan, most of them living in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. The people known as Pashtuns speak Pashto, a type of Eastern Iranian language, and are famous for maintaining thousands of years of tribal traditions (Barth, 1959).

For Pashtuns, the tribal code Pashtunwali is central, and it stresses helpfulness (melmastia), sanctuary (nanawatai), the concept of justice by revenge (badal), and gathering a jury to decide (jirga). This social order takes control of relationships between people, decreasing conflicts and governance, usually

without involvement from the central government (Ahmed, 1980).

The way Pashtun society works, with its many tribes who are not united, has traditionally stopped foreign rulers from controlling them. Resilience plays a big role in what makes Pashtun nationalism last, as it encourages people to defend against being dominated by outsiders (Monsutti, 2005).

Pashtun nationalist movements and influential leaders of the early twentieth century

Pashtun nationalism grew in importance at the start of the 20th century, especially as a response to British colonization and the forming of Pakistan. Among the leaders of this movement, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, or Bacha Khan/the Frontier Gandhi, played a key role. He started the Khudai Khidmatgar (“Servants of God”) movement to teach his people how to resist by being peaceful and to help improve society (Gretchen, 2010).

Bacha Khan tried to unite Pashtuns on either side of the colonial borders, supporting Pashtun rights, justice, and freedom from British rule. It was education, nonviolent resistance, and activism that his beliefs stressed, all tied to Pashtunwali. Bacha Khan started with the Indian National Congress but later opposed partition and began to oppose actions taken by the Pakistani government against Pashtuns (Banerjee, 2013).

Mid-20th century saw the Pashtunistan movement rise, asking for an independent or autonomous region for Pashtuns covering their territories on either side of the Durand Line. Although the Taliban received some support in Afghanistan and among Pashtun leaders in Pakistan, the Pakistani government blocked any plans to make it into a formal group (Grare, 2006).

Post-Independence Scenario

As soon as Pakistan was created in 1947, Pashtun nationalism faced different challenges. Pakistan included Pashtun regions in its government but rarely gave them control, which caused tension about political influence, culture, and economic matters.

The Pashtunkhwa Milli Awami Party (PkMAP), which emerged in the 1980s, worked within the democratic process in Pakistan to defend Pashtun rights. PkMAP aims to have more control over their province, acknowledge the Pashto language and culture, and promote equal growth in Pashtun areas (Ali, 2017).

ANP, which grew from the Khudai Khidmatgar, has contributed to supporting Pashtun nationalism, secular values, and new progressive policies in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Elliott, 2015).

Present-day Pashtun Nationalist Movements

The Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) came to life in 2018 and has revitalized Pashtun nationalism in recent years. PTM stands against forced disappearances, unwarranted shootings, and military operations in areas where Pashtuns live and demands that all abuses are investigated (Yousafzai & Moreau, 2019).

Rather than working through traditional political parties, PTM uses social media and organizes large protests, stressing nonviolent methods and shining light on the Pashtun community’s struggles because of many years of conflict (Rashid, 2020). It questions the country’s security strategies as well as ethnic inequalities.

PTM asks for landmines to be removed, for everyone to have access to education and healthcare, and for compensation for victims of war. Regardless of frequent censorship and pressure by the government, PTM continues to be important in shaping the politics of the Pashtuns (Khan, 2021).

Pashtun identity and events in the region.

Pashtun nationalism influences areas outside Afghanistan and mixes with regional politics. The Pashtun

population in Afghanistan has long been responsible for political affairs, which has led to problems with Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks (Rubin, 1995). Since the Taliban group started among Pashtuns, it adds to the confusion about connections between ethnicity and political positions.

The unity Pashtun people maintain across borders affects how Pakistan and Afghanistan view the legitimacy of the Durand Line. Governments in Afghanistan use Pashtun nationalism to defend their interests and shape their domestic policies, while Pashtun groups in Pakistan oscillate between supporting and opposing the government (Siddiqi, 2007).

Security Issues and Cross-Border Matters

For many years, people, goods, and, most importantly, armed groups have had little trouble moving across the Durand Line because it is so open. Difficult terrain and little government presence near many tribal and border areas have made it easy for militants, smugglers, and refugees to move across the border, making it more difficult to control the area (Johnson, 2007).

Pashtun resistance to having boundaries set by others and their strong ties to nearby tribes have led to unclear borders. Because of this, it is politically tricky and testing for border enforcement agencies to act on their own (Siddiqi, 2007).

Activities by militants have turned the region where FATA (now part of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) and Afghanistan's eastern provinces meet into a hotspot. The Taliban, chiefly Pashtun tribes, operate their insurgency campaigns against the Afghan government from this region.

Since the groups have similar goals and methods, the Afghan Taliban and Pakistan's Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) take advantage of the weak border for recruiting members, training them, and carrying out attacks within Pakistan (NBR, 2024). Because of cross-border sanctuaries, the TTP can survive the Pakistani military's actions and remain active in the insurgency.

Belief in both countries that the other is supporting terrorists has increased their diplomatic disputes. Pakistan believes the Afghan Taliban protect TTP fighters within the country, while the Taliban (Afghan government) claim that Pakistan allows anti-Kabul groups to seek shelter there (Al Jazeera, 2024).

Building Fences and Control Systems

So, Pakistan planned to build the Afghanistan-Pakistan border fence starting in 2017 to stop unlawful entries, illegal trafficking, and military incursions. The fence includes barbed wire, cameras, and guard posts, showing the change toward more control by the ruling party of the disputed line (Wikipedia, 2025).

Despite this, the fencing project has led to several disputes. Afghan officials and groups in the Pashtun community argue the fence separates shared tribal land, stops them from traveling as they traditionally have, and goes against their cultural and economic ties. Often, demonstrations and conflicts appear along the border, showing that there are strong feelings about the Durand Line (Al Jazeera, 2024).

Even though joint border measures have been discussed by both countries, progress is still slow because of mutual distrust and complicated matters in the border area (International Crisis Group, 2022).

Regional Geopolitical consequences

The issues of the Durand Line and cross-border politics have a connection to regional geopolitics that includes several players.

In India's view, Pakistan is a major competitor, and it pays Afghan forces to oppose Pakistan-linked sides just as it uses border issues to argue against Pakistan's claim of sovereignty over the Pashtun areas (Observer Research Foundation, 2024).

United States: Washington wants to break up militant networks that operate on both sides of the AfPak border. Although the U.S. has taken steps to secure the border, it still points out that Pakistan does not always act against all Islamic militant groups (Foreign Policy, 2023).

China: Regional integration is one of China's goals under the Belt and Road Initiative, and close border ties are vital to that. If border and security issues are not handled properly, the CPEC may be affected by resulting instability (CSIS, 2023).

Iran also shares a border with Afghanistan and experiences problems when refugees and militants from Afghanistan come into its territory (Middle East Institute, 2024).

Humanitarian and Social Needs

Militarization and ongoing conflict affected by the Durand Line do not leave people unaffected. The relocation of Pashtun people, cuts in traditional jobs, and travel restrictions cause problems for their social lives. Most of the refugees from Afghanistan to Pakistan settle near the borders, which adds to the shortage of resources and creates conflicts among the population (UNHCR, 2025).

Strategies for better border management ought to look after locals' needs while increasing security, so the problems that divide people and lead to rivalry can be reduced (Qureshi, 2021).

Conclusion

These two issues are closely related and continue to influence politics, society, and security in South Asia. The Durand Line was originally finished during British colonial times, ignoring the ethnic and tribal backgrounds of the Pashtun people, which broke up local groups, disrupted old ties, and continues to cause arguments between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Pashtun nationalism, which is based on past wrongs and hopes for uniting the community and gaining political significance, opposes the validity of this border drawn by the British. Across the last one hundred years, Pashtun identity moved from being united by tribe to leading political movements, both peaceful and advocating for autonomy and human rights. Leaders such as Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan and present-day groups like the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement show that Pashtuns still want to be recognized and treated justly in both countries.

The fact that the Durand Line is porous helps militants, insurgents, and refugees move across borders, which makes security problems worse for Afghanistan and Pakistan. Because of this boundary ambiguity, militant groups, mainly the Taliban and Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, can move around more freely and affect regional stability in a negative way. Despite fencing and military steps taken by Pakistan at the border, there has been strong and continued resistance from Afghanistan and the Pashtun tribes, which shows that sovereignty and the rights of ethnic groups can be in opposition.

The Durand Line dispute is part of larger geopolitical conflicts between India, the United States, China, and Iran, which influences how it develops. Because of this context, it is not straightforward for diplomats to settle the border issue and improve ties between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

A successful solution must focus on involving all parties. Paying more attention to Pashtun identity and their main worries in politics, culture, and economics is crucial for reducing unrest. Trust-building between Kabul and Islamabad at the borders can promote safety, consider local communities, and support mutual understanding. Furthermore, partnering with regional and international stakeholders can set up a positive atmosphere for talks that lead to a solution.

All in all, the Durand Line dispute is more than a dispute over borders; it also deals with ethnic groups, history, and the way governments function today. The region's lasting peace and reliability depend on fully seeing and supporting the many traditions within Pashtun society and creating political answers that move beyond old colonial breakups. The only way to do away with the long-term problems of the Durand Line is to have comprehensive strategies that encourage people from both countries to cooperate

and support regional unity.

References

- Ahmed, A. S. (1980). *Pukhtun Economy and Society: Traditional Structure and Economic Development in a Tribal Society*. Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Al Jazeera. (2024). Pakistan-Afghanistan Border Fence and Pashtun Tribes.
- Ali, H. (2017). The Politics of Pashtun Nationalism in Pakistan. *Journal of South Asian Studies*, 40(3), 499–513.
- Banerjee, P. (2013). *Bacha Khan: A Political Biography*. Oxford University Press.
- Dupree, L. (1973). *Afghanistan*. Princeton University Press.
- Elliott, A. (2015). The Awami National Party and Pashtun Nationalism. *Asian Survey*, 55(1), 54-76.
- Grare, F. (2006). Pakistan and Afghanistan: The Path to Normalization? *Carnegie Papers*.
- Gretchen, L. (2010). *Bacha Khan and the Nonviolent Movement*.
- Hopkirk, P. (1992). *The Great Game: The Struggle for Empire in Central Asia*.
- <https://southasianvoices.org/pashtun-nationalism-cross-border-politics/>
- <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/02/pakistan-afghanistan-border-fence-pashtun-tribes>
- <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/afghanistans-security-challenges-under-taliban>
- <https://www.orfonline.org/research/india-pakistan-dynamics-afghanistan/>
- International Crisis Group. (2022). *Afghanistan's Security Challenges under the Taliban*.
- Jan, A. (2022). The Rise of Taliban in Afghanistan in 2021 and its Security Implications for Pakistan. *Pakistan Journal of Social Research*, 4(04), 1059-1067. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52567/pjsr.v4i04.912>
- Johnson, T. H. (2007). Tribal Dynamics and Militancy in the Pashtun Belt. *Journal of Conflict Studies*.
- Khan, N. (2021). The Pashtun Tahafuz Movement: Civil Rights in Pakistan. *Journal of Contemporary South Asia*, 29(3), 315-328.
- Monsutti, A. (2005). *War and Migration: Social Networks and Economic Strategies of the Hazaras of Afghanistan*. Routledge.
- Observer Research Foundation. (2024). *India-Pakistan Dynamics over Afghanistan*.
- Qureshi, M. (2021). Socioeconomic Tensions in Refugee Hosting Areas. *Pakistani Journal of Social Sciences*, 41(3), 88-102.
- Rashid, A. (2020). *Pakistan on the Brink: The Future of Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the West*. Penguin Books.
- Rubin, B. R. (1995). *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan*. Yale University Press.
- Saikal, A. (2012). *Modern Afghanistan: A History of Struggle and Survival*.
- Shah, R., & Khan, A. (2020). Integration of Afghan Refugees in Pakistan: Challenges and Opportunities. *International Migration Review*, 54(1), 72-98.
- Siddiqi, A. (2007). *Military Inc.: Inside Pakistan's Military Economy*.
- South Asian Voices. (2023). *Pashtun Nationalism and Cross-Border Politics*.
- Tahir-Kheli, S. (1975). Ethnic Groups and Political Identity in Pakistan. *Asian Survey*.