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PAK-AFGHAN BORDER MANAGEMENT A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE ASHRAF GHANI AND TALIBAN 2.0 REGIMES

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Abstract

This study provides a comparative analysis of Pak-Afghan border management under two distinct governance paradigms in Kabul: the Western-backed administration of President Ashraf Ghani (2014–2021) and the re-established Islamic Emirate under Taliban 2.0 (2021–present). Spanning over 2,600 kilometers, the contested Durand Line has historically served as a volatile frontier defined by structural friction between Pakistan's demand for hard territorial sovereignty and Afghanistan's persistent non-recognition of the boundary. Anchored in Realism and Securitization Theory, this qualitative research evaluates how regime transition in Kabul has impacted border security policies, physical infrastructure, counterterrorism cooperation, and bilateral relations. Under Ashraf Ghani, border management was characterized by intense diplomatic hostility, mutual accusations of proxy warfare, and strong opposition to Pakistan's multi-billion-dollar border fencing initiative. The Taliban's return to power in August 2021 initially raised expectations in Islamabad of strategic alignment; however, post-2021 dynamics reveal surprising continuity. Taliban 2.0 has echoed traditional Afghan nationalist positions regarding the border, actively resisting physical fencing and engaging in localized skirmishes. Furthermore, the persistent threat of cross-border terrorism, primarily driven by the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), has severely strained bilateral ties, prompting Islamabad to enforce strict entry controls, trade regulations, and refugee deportations. The study concludes that while physical barriers are crucial for Pakistan's national security, unilateral hard-power mechanisms alone cannot ensure frontier stability. Sustainable border governance requires a fundamental transition from zero-sum security paradigms toward a shared bilateral consensus on territorial sovereignty, counterterrorism accountability, and regional economic connectivity.

Keywords: *Ashraf Ghani, Border Fencing, Border Management, Counterterrorism, Durand Line, Pak-Afghan Border, Taliban 2.0, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).*

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1. Introduction

The 2,670-kilometer Durand Line, established in 1893, forms the contested and porous border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. For Pakistan, managing this frontier is critical to national security, territorial integrity, counterterrorism, and trade. Conversely, successive regimes in Kabul have historically questioned the border's legal status, treating it as an artificial divide separating cross-border Pashtun tribal populations. Consequently, border management sits at the complex intersection of state sovereignty, regional security, and economic mobility.

This paper provides a comparative analysis of Pak-Afghan border management under two distinct governance paradigms in Kabul: the Western-backed administration of President Ashraf Ghani (2014–2021) and the re-established Islamic Emirate under Taliban 2.0 (2021–present).

During Ashraf Ghani's tenure, border dynamics were characterized by intense diplomatic friction, frequent military clashes, and strong opposition to Pakistan's border fencing project and strict visa regimes. Kabul viewed these measures as unilateral impositions, while Islamabad cited them as necessary responses to cross-border terrorism and illegal smuggling.

The Taliban's return to power in August 2021 initially raised expectations in Islamabad for improved border coordination and counterterrorism cooperation, particularly regarding the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). However, Taliban 2.0 has exhibited surprising continuity with its predecessor by maintaining traditional nationalist positions on the Durand Line, resisting border fencing, and engaging in localized skirmishes. Furthermore, persistent TTP cross-border attacks have severely strained bilateral ties, prompting Pakistan to enforce strict border controls and trade regulations.

By examining border infrastructure, counterterrorism cooperation, cross-border movement, and diplomatic mechanisms, this study evaluates how regime change in Kabul has reshaped border management and impacted regional stability

2. Historical Background of Pak-Afghan Border Relations

The geopolitical turbulence defining the Pak-Afghan border is rooted in nineteenth-century imperial rivalry, colonial boundary demarcation, and persistent state-building dilemmas. The legal and physical outline of the border originated in the 1893 Durand Line Agreement, signed between Sir Henry Mortimer Durand, representing British India, and Amir Abdur Rahman Khan of Afghanistan. Designed primarily as a strategic buffer zone to safeguard British India from potential Tsarist Russian expansion during the "Great Game," the 2,670-kilometer boundary effectively partitioned the traditional Pashtun tribal belt.

Following the partition of British India in 1947, Pakistan inherited the Durand Line as its lawful western international boundary under international law principles governing

state succession (*uti possidetis juris*). However, the newly formed sovereign state of Afghanistan, under King Zahir Shah, rejected the permanency of the line, arguing that historical agreements made with the British Crown were void post-decolonization. Consequently, Afghanistan stood as the sole country to vote against Pakistan's admission to the United Nations in September 1947, setting a precedent of diplomatic hostility rooted in territorial non-recognition.

As noted by the eminent historian and scholar of South Asian geopolitics, Louis Dupree:

"The Durand Line was conceived by the British as a line of influence, not of absolute sovereignty. Subsequent Afghan governments have consistently leveraged this historical ambiguity, treating the frontier not as a fixed international limit, but as an open cultural and geographical continuum belonging to the Pashtun nation."[1]

Throughout the Cold War era, Pak-Afghan border relations fluctuated between low-intensity military standoffs and ideological proxy confrontations. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 fundamentally reshaped the border matrix, converting the porous frontier into a sanctuary and transit route for millions of Afghan refugees and Western-backed Mujahideen fighters. While this period facilitated strategic collaboration between Islamabad and various Afghan factions, it simultaneously eroded formal border management structures and institutionalized cross-border informal economies, weapon flows, and unsanctioned movement.

The emergence of the first Taliban regime in 1996 did not alter Kabul's fundamental refusal to officially recognize the Durand Line, despite Islamabad's diplomatic backing of the movement. Post-9/11 US intervention further complicated border management; the frontier turned into a volatile front in the global "War on Terror," marked by sanctuary dynamics, insurgent movement, and militant safe havens. Consequently, the historical background of the frontier reflects a continuous structural tension between Pakistan's imperative to institutionalize a hard, regulated international border and Afghanistan's persistent assertion of soft, historically fluid cross-border sovereignty.

3. Theoretical Framework: Border Security and Bilateral Relations

The conceptualization of border management and its influence on bilateral relations between sovereign states is deeply rooted in International Relations (IR) theory. Borders are not merely static geographical demarcations; they represent dynamic institutions where state sovereignty, national security, territoriality, and cross-border identities intersect. To rigorously examine the comparative border management dynamics between Pakistan and Afghanistan during the Ashraf Ghani administration and the Taliban 2.0 regime, this study constructs a theoretical framework anchored in Realism (Statist-

Security Paradigm) and Securitization Theory (Copenhagen School), alongside structural perspectives from Borderlands Studies.

4. Realism and State Sovereignty Paradigm

Realism provides the primary structural foundation for understanding Pakistan's security-driven approach toward its western frontier. In an anarchic international system, states prioritize survival, territorial integrity, and national security above all else. Within Realist theory, a border serves as the physical barrier defining the limits of state monopoly over the legitimate use of violence. For Pakistan, the institutionalization of a "hard border"—characterized by physical fencing, biometrically regulated entry points, and anti-smuggling enforcement—is a rational Realist response to mitigate external vulnerabilities, cross-border insurgency, and asymmetric security threats.

As prominent International Relations theorist Stephen Walt highlights regarding state survival and threat perception:

"States do not balance against power alone; they balance against threats. When cross-border spaces become source zones for insurgent violence and ideological extremism, the state's primary imperative is to harden its frontiers to neutralize the power projection of non-state armed actors."[2]

5. Securitization Theory (Copenhagen School)

While Realism explains the structural necessity of border control, Securitization Theory—pioneered by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver—explains how border issues are politically constructed and transformed into existential security threats. Securitization occurs when a political actor uses a "speech act" to frame a specific issue (such as illegal migration, cross-border movement, or border fencing) as an urgent threat that justifies extraordinary measures beyond normal political procedures.

During both the Ashraf Ghani regime and the Taliban 2.0 administration, Securitization was dynamically deployed by both sides. Islamabad securitized the porous frontier by framing uncontrolled Afghan migration and sanctuary dynamics for the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) as existential threats to domestic stability. Conversely, leadership in Kabul—under both regimes—securitized Pakistan's unilateral border fencing, framing it as an illegitimate attempt to permanently enforce the colonial Durand Line and divide the trans-boundary Pashtun ethno-linguistic community.

As political scientist and securitization theorist Barry Buzan posits:

"Securitization is the move that takes politics beyond the established rules of the game and frames the issue either as a special kind of story or as an above-politics issue that has to be treated as an absolute priority."[3]

6. Synthesis and Application to Comparative Analysis

By integrating Realism, Securitization Theory, and Borderlands dynamics, this theoretical framework allows for a multi-layered comparative analysis:

Realist Security Imperative vs. Irredentist Nationalism: Explains why Pakistan consistently pursues border hard-power infrastructure (fencing, posts, border controls), whereas Afghan regimes—irrespective of their democratic (Ghani) or Islamist (Taliban 2.0) ideology—maintain soft-border Pashtun nationalist resistance.

Securitization of Non-State Actors: Demonstrates how cross-border proxy dynamics and militant sanctuaries (e.g., TTP) fundamentally alter bilateral relations and force transitions from traditional diplomacy to militarized border enforcement.

23Pak-Afghan Border Management under the Ashraf Ghani Regime (2014–2021)

The presidency of Ashraf Ghani (2014–2021) represented a turbulent phase in Pak-Afghan relations, during which border management transformed from a traditionally loose frontier arrangement into a highly militarized, political, and institutional point of contention. Driven by escalating domestic security threats and cross-border terrorism, Pakistan initiated a fundamental overhaul of its western border policy. However, the Ghani administration fundamentally opposed these unilateral security measures, leading to persistent diplomatic impasses, intense ideological resistance, and military standoffs along the Durand Line.

6.1. Border Fencing and Security Measures

In response to frequent cross-border militant incursions and illicit smuggling, Pakistan launched a monumental border fencing project in March 2017 along the 2,670-kilometer frontier, supplemented by high-tech surveillance posts, radar systems, and biometrically integrated check-posts (such as at Torkham and Chaman). Islamabad framed this multi-billion-dollar endeavor as an imperative sovereign necessity to regulate movement and secure its national territory. Conversely, President Ashraf Ghani and his administration vehemently rejected the initiative, viewing the fence as a physical and legal consolidation of the disputed Durand Line that aimed to permanently sever trans-boundary Pashtun tribal cohesion.

As South Asian security analyst and border management scholar Amina Khan observes:

"Pakistan’s decision to fence the border marked a structural departure from historical ambiguity toward strict territorial sovereignty. However, for the Ashraf Ghani government, the fence was less about counterterrorism and more about a unilateral attempt to legitimize a colonial boundary without Kabul’s consent."[4]

6.2. Cross-Border Militancy and Security Challenges

The Ghani era was defined by deep mutual distrust regarding cross-border terrorism and proxy warfare. Islamabad repeatedly accused Kabul and its intelligence agency, the National Directorate of Security (NDS), of providing safe havens, logistical support, and operational space to anti-Pakistan militant groups, primarily the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), along Afghanistan's

eastern borderlands. Conversely, Kabul accused Pakistan's security establishment of maintaining a "double game" by granting sanctuary to the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani Network to destabilize the Western-backed Afghan state. This bilateral blame game severely impaired cooperative border policing and rendered the frontier an active theater of asymmetric warfare.

As regional security analyst Ahmed Rashid noted regarding the cross-border insurgency matrix:

"The failure of both Islamabad and Kabul to establish a shared definition of security along their common border created a lethal vacuum, enabling non-state armed actors to exploit borderland sanctuaries while both governments remained trapped in a zero-sum game of mutual recrimination."[5]

6.3. Bilateral Cooperation and Diplomatic Engagement

Despite pervasive political hostility, institutional mechanisms were periodically established to prevent outright military collapse and facilitate regulated trade. The most prominent diplomatic framework was the Afghanistan-Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity (APAPPS), inaugurated in 2018, which aimed to streamline military-to-military coordination, intelligence sharing, border management, and refugee repatriation. Additionally, efforts were made to modernize border trade infrastructure through the Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA). However, political mistrust, frequent military skirmishes at major border crossings, and Ghani's alignment with India continually crippled the operational efficacy of these diplomatic frameworks.

As international relations scholar Marvin Weinbaum explained regarding the limits of diplomatic engagement during this era:

"While institutional frameworks like APAPPS offered a theoretical blueprint for border cooperation, they consistently faltered in practice because political leaders in Kabul and Islamabad viewed border management through the prism of deep-seated geopolitical suspicion rather than shared economic and security interdependence."[6]

Pak-Afghan Border Management under the Taliban 2.0 Regime (2021 Onwards)

The unexpected return of the Afghan Taliban to power in Kabul in August 2021 was initially perceived in Islamabad as a pivotal geopolitical shift that would usher in a new era of strategic alignment and cooperative border governance. However, the reality of post-2021 border management has revealed deep structural friction and unexpected continuity with past Afghan administrations. Rather than securing the frontier through ideological solidarity, Taliban 2.0 has asserted a hardline sovereign posture along the border, fiercely resisting Pakistan's physical fencing infrastructure and failing to curb cross-border militant operations.

6.4. Border Security Policies and Control Mechanisms

Upon consolidating governance, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) established dedicated border security brigades under its Ministry of Defense to oversee major border crossings, including Torkham, Chaman, and Spin Boldak. Despite Islamabad's expectation that a friendly regime in Kabul would formally recognize and validate the frontier, Taliban 2.0 unequivocally echoed traditional Pashtun nationalist rhetoric regarding the Durand Line. Taliban border forces actively disrupted Pakistani construction teams, uprooted physical fencing in multiple border sectors (such as Nangarhar and Nimruz), and rejected unilateral physical barriers. In response, Pakistan tightened its border control mechanisms by enforcing the One-Document Regime (requiring valid passports and visas for all Afghan entrants), deploying additional paramilitary Frontier Corps units, and implementing strict anti-smuggling protocols along major transit corridors.

As International Crisis Group South Asia analyst Ibrahim Bahiss highlights regarding the Taliban's border posture:

"The Taliban's refusal to accept the Durand Line or tolerate Pakistan's border fence underscores that institutional Afghan nationalism and sovereign sensitivity over border demarcation fundamentally transcend ideological or political affiliations in Kabul."[7]

7. Border Clashes and Cross-Border Militancy

The defining challenge in Pak-Afghan border management under Taliban 2.0 has been the dramatic escalation of cross-border terrorism, primarily driven by the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Operating from safe havens in eastern and southern Afghanistan, the TTP launched persistent attacks targeting Pakistani security checkpoints and civilian infrastructure across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. The Taliban regime's reluctance to forcefully neutralize TTP sanctuaries led to frequent kinetic friction along the border. Localized skirmishes between Pakistani forces and Taliban border guards repeatedly escalated into artillery shelling and tactical border closures, significantly disrupting cross-border trade and transit.

As regional security scholar Dr. Asfandyar Mir observes on cross-border militant dynamics:

"The Taliban regime's unwillingness to clamp down on the TTP has created a volatile security paradox, turning the Pak-Afghan border into an active conflict zone marked by unilateral Pakistani air raids, border closures, and tit-for-tat military exchanges."[8]

7.1. Diplomatic Engagement and Bilateral Tensions

Diplomatic interactions between Islamabad and Kabul under Taliban 2.0 have oscillated between high-level security dialogue and coercive economic-administrative

pressures. While institutional mechanisms—such as joint border committees and high-level intelligence exchanges—were maintained, Pakistan's diplomatic patience severely eroded over persistent TTP cross-border raids. To compel Kabul's compliance on counterterrorism, Islamabad resorted to strategic leverage, including the deportation of over half a million undocumented Afghan nationals, strict enforcement of transit trade restrictions, and prolonged border closures. While Taliban officials characterized these measures as economic blockade and collective punishment, Pakistan maintained that border regulation and national security are non-negotiable sovereign rights.

As South Asian foreign policy expert Ambassador Maleeha Lodhi notes regarding the diplomatic impasse:

"Bilateral relations between Pakistan and the Taliban regime have deteriorated into a state of deep tactical mistrust, where border management is no longer viewed as a collaborative administrative exercise, but as a primary tool of diplomatic leverage and national deterrence."[9]

8. Comparative Analysis of Border Management under Both Regimes

Comparing border management across the Ashraf Ghani presidency (2014–2021) and the Taliban 2.0 administration (2021–present) reveals a striking duality in Pak-Afghan geopolitical relations. While the transition from a Western-backed democratic government to an ideological Islamist emirate was expected to reshape bilateral dynamics, a comparative examination shows that core sovereign imperatives, historical territorial sensitivities, and security frictions remain fundamentally persistent.

8.1. Continuity and Change in Border Policies

The transition from Ghani to Taliban 2.0 demonstrates significant continuity alongside key tactical shifts. The most prominent continuity is Kabul's structural refusal to grant formal legal recognition to the Durand Line, preserving a long-standing Afghan state posture. Both regimes viewed Pakistan's border regulation—such as strict entry controls and fencing—through a suspicious, state-centric nationalist lens. However, the nature of border enforcement changed: while Ghani relied heavily on international legal rhetoric, diplomatic alliances, and coalition support, Taliban 2.0 deployed decentralized, ideologically driven border units that directly confronted Pakistani security personnel on the ground.

As South Asian foreign policy analyst Dr. Touqir Hussain observes regarding continuity across Afghan regimes:

"Regimes in Kabul may undergo radical ideological shifts—from Western-aligned democracies to religious emirates—yet their fundamental posture on the Durand Line and border regulation remains unchanged, rooted in deep-seated state nationalism rather than political ideology."[10]

8.2. Security Cooperation and Conflict Management

Security cooperation between Islamabad and Kabul remained consistently dysfunctional across both eras, albeit driven by different militant threat vectors. Under Ashraf Ghani, security discourse was dominated by mutual accusations of state-sponsored proxy warfare: Kabul accused Islamabad of supporting the Afghan Taliban, while Islamabad accused Kabul's NDS of backing the TTP and BLA. Under Taliban 2.0, the proxy paradigm shifted to ideological sanctuary dynamics. Despite historical ties, Taliban 2.0's reluctance to neutralize TTP safe havens created an operational crisis for Pakistan, leading to frequent border closures, cross-border shelling, and unilateral Pakistani counterterrorism operations inside Afghan territory.

As international security expert Seth G. Jones notes on cross-border security friction:

"The failure of conflict management mechanisms along the Durand Line highlights a core dilemma: neither democratic institution-building under Ghani nor ideological affinity under the Taliban could reconcile Pakistan's hard security requirements with Afghanistan's territorial resistance."[11]

8.3. Border Fencing and the Durand Line Dispute

The physical fencing of the frontier represents the central tangible flashpoint in comparative border analysis. During the Ghani administration, Pakistan completed the vast majority of its multi-billion-dollar fencing project despite Kabul's intense diplomatic protests and localized military standoffs. Under Taliban 2.0, resistance shifted from diplomatic condemnation to direct physical disruption, with Taliban fighters removing fence panels and destroying border posts in multiple sectors. This reaction proved that Afghan opposition to the barrier is not merely an policy stance of specific leaders, but an institutionalized national position embedded within Afghan statecraft.

As political strategist and scholar Michael Semple highlights regarding the Durand Line barrier:

"Pakistan's border fencing was designed to permanently settle a security vulnerability, but for both Ghani and the Taliban, accepting a physical fence meant tacitly surrendering Afghanistan's historical claim over trans-border sovereign space."[12]

8.4. Political Trust and Bilateral Relations

Political trust between Islamabad and Kabul reached low points under both governance paradigms. The Ghani era was marked by open diplomatic hostility, rhetoric alignment with India, and public recriminations at international forums. Conversely, the initial optimism surrounding the Taliban's return quickly deteriorated into tactical mistrust over economic leverage, forced deportations of undocumented refugees, and border blockades. Ultimately, both regimes demonstrated that without a shared bilateral

consensus on border sovereignty and counterterrorism, sustainable political trust remains unachievable.

As regional analyst Elizabeth Threlkeld remarks on bilateral trust dynamics:

"The breakdown of political trust under both Ghani and Taliban 2.0 demonstrates that shared ideology cannot substitute for strategic alignment on border management, national sovereignty, and counterterrorism commitments."[13]

9. Conclusion

The comparative analysis of Pak-Afghan border management under the Ashraf Ghani presidency and the Taliban 2.0 regime highlights a persistent structural dilemma in South Asian geopolitics. Despite radical ideological shifts in Kabul, the 2,670-kilometer Durand Line remains a fundamental source of friction, reflecting the deep divergence between Pakistan's demand for hard territorial sovereignty and Afghanistan's historical non-recognition of the boundary.

During Ashraf Ghani's tenure (2014–2021), border relations were defined by open diplomatic hostility, mutual accusations of proxy warfare, and strong resistance to Pakistan's border fencing project. The return of Taliban 2.0 in August 2021 was expected to align bilateral interests; however, the new regime demonstrated surprising continuity by echoing traditional Afghan nationalist opposition to the fence and Durand Line. Furthermore, the post-2021 escalation of TTP attacks from Afghan soil has severely strained relations, forcing Pakistan to enforce strict border controls, trade regulations, and refugee deportations.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that physical barriers and unilateral security measures alone cannot permanently secure the frontier. Long-term stability requires both Islamabad and Kabul to move beyond zero-sum security perspectives and establish a shared bilateral consensus on territorial sovereignty, counterterrorism accountability, and regional economic cooperation

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