

Afghanistan-Pakistan Relations: Road Ahead

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Executive Summary

After six months of its takeover, the Taliban has stabilised its interim government in Afghanistan. At the same time, the resurgence of TTP activity in Pakistan and growing tensions along the Durand Line are impacting Afghanistan-Pakistan relations. The growing challenge to the writ of the Pakistani state suggests that, rather than the supposed strategic fortunes emanating from the Taliban victory, it is the deterioration of Islamabad's strategic environment that will dictate the course of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations.

This note analyses the rise in tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan following the establishment of the Taliban's government in Kabul. It details how the rise of the TTP and the spurt in the growth of Pashtun nationalism vis-à-vis the Durand Line dispute is impacting the bilateral relationship.

1. Rise in Afghanistan-Pakistan Tensions

The Taliban victory in August 2021 was heralded in Pakistan as having broken the “shackles of slavery”¹. Subsequently, as fissures within the Taliban rose, Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) moved into action and imposed an interim government in Afghanistan². With its successful campaign against the National Resistance Front in Panjshir valley, the Taliban has been able to stabilise the government, though this has come at the cost of a growing humanitarian disaster³. However, despite the Taliban's success in stabilising Afghanistan, Pakistan's much-vaunted goal of “strategic depth” remains far from being realised.

Reports of clashes between the Pakistan army and the Taliban has become frequent⁴. Many of these incidents have involved artillery fires across the border, dismantling of Pakistani checkpoints on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, and growing terrorist attacks by Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). In one such incident in December 2021, the Taliban arrested seven Pakistani soldiers in Paktika province who were trying to fence the border between the two countries⁵.

In the aftermath of one such border incident in Nangarhar province, Afghan defence ministry spokesman Enayatullah Khwarazmi said that the Taliban forces stopped the Pakistani military from erecting an “illegal” border fence⁶. The growing challenge to the writ of the Pakistani state suggests that, rather than the supposed strategic fortunes emanating from the Taliban victory, it is the deterioration of Islamabad's strategic environment that will dictate the course of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations.

2. *Source of Tensions*

2.1 Resurgence of TTP

The ongoing revival of the TTP under the leadership of Noor Wali Mehsud has led to a sharp rise in terrorist activity in Pakistan⁷. According to a Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies report, 207 terrorist attacks took place in Pakistan in 2021, leading to the loss of 335 lives. These attacks marked an increase of 42% from 2020. The Islamist groups operating from Afghanistan, such as the TTP, local Taliban groups, and Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K), were responsible for a combined total of 128 terrorist attacks, up 35% from the previous year⁸. The TTP itself claimed 282 attacks in 2021 and an additional 42 attacks in January 2022⁹.

On February 6, five Pakistani soldiers were killed in Kurram district in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in a cross-border firing from Afghanistan. The statement released by the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) after the incident said that “terrorists from inside Afghanistan, across the international border, opened fire on Pakistani troops”. It also condemned “the use of Afghan soil by terrorists for activities against Pakistan” and expected that the “interim Afghan government will not allow the conduct of such activities against Pakistan in future”¹⁰. The statement highlighted growing concern about the use of Afghan territory for terrorist operations in Pakistan. With this, Pakistan became the first country to accuse the Afghan Taliban of harbouring terrorists. In response, the Taliban denied that the firing had come from Afghan territory and assured that “no one will be allowed to use Afghan land against Pakistan”¹¹.

After the Taliban victory, some in Pakistan had become prone to wishful thinking that the Taliban would act as a pressure group on the TTP to limit its future offensives¹². The presence of Sirajuddin Haqqani as the Minister for Interior in the interim government had also furnished these hopes¹³. Thus, in October 2021, Pakistani PM Imran Khan revealed in an interview with *TRT World* that his government was in talks with TTP groups for the reconciliation process¹⁴.

Consequently, with the mediation of Sirajuddin Haqqani, a month-long ceasefire was announced in November 2021¹⁵. However, the TTP's refusal to release the top commanders of the TTP ultimately led to the collapse of the ceasefire in December¹⁶. Since then, the TTP has resumed its attacks on Pakistan's military forces. Among the most contentious elements of the TTP's demand have been the group's insistence on imposing Sharia in Pakistan and opening its political office in a third country. While much has been written over the years over the TTP's goal of the

overthrowing Pakistan's constitution, the insistence on opening a political office in a third country shows that the TTP is drawing immense confidence from the success of the Afghan Taliban. This is likely to become a prominent sticking point between the two sides in future negotiations.

During the insurgency phase, the Afghan Taliban had maintained a public distance from the TTP even though the two groups were fighting together against the US and Afghan National Forces. After its victory the Taliban has allowed the TTP to operate from Afghan territory. Due to close fraternal and ideological ties, it is unlikely that the Afghan Taliban would be able to act against the TTP. Further, the Afghan Taliban's push against the TTP could also lead to regime instability by provoking TTP defections to its primary rival in Afghanistan, the Islamic State. For Islamabad, the Afghan Taliban's unwillingness to act against the TTP will likely emerge as a long-term problem. This will become particularly true as the Taliban gradually weans away from the ISI's control.

2.2 Tensions along the Durand Line

The issue of the Durand Line is also emerging as one of the most significant conflicts between the two countries. In a January interview to a YouTube channel, Afghan Information Minister and Chief Spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid claimed that the fencing of the Durand Line by Pakistan was tantamount to "dividing a nation"¹⁷. Zabihullah's statement came in the aftermath of the social media videos that emerged in December 2021 showing the Taliban forces dismantling the fencing in Nangarhar province. Terming the border fence "illegal", Afghan defence ministry spokesman Enayatullah Khwarazmi said that the Taliban forces stopped the Pakistani military from erecting the border fence¹⁸.

The nation referred to by Zabihullah was the historical nation of Pashtuns, the biggest ethnic group in Afghanistan, divided by the British Empire in 1893. Thus, the Afghan Taliban's identification of the Durand Line as a national issue implies that Islamabad's attempts to fence the disputed border would continue to be resisted. As the Taliban's Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai, claimed, "the Durand Line is an issue of the whole nation, not the government. It doesn't belong to the government. We will give the responsibility to the nation, so the nation will make the decision"¹⁹.

Historically, Islamabad has periodically felt the need to destabilise Afghanistan through its policy of seeking "strategic depth". However, it was the issue of the Durand Line and a unified Pashtunistan, invoked by President Daoud Khan, which led to the ISI funding of the mujahideen in the 1970s. As former Pakistan army chief General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani stated in 2010,

“strategic depth isn’t about ‘controlling’ Afghanistan but about ensuring Pakistan doesn’t have a long-term security problem on its western border”²⁰. The disputed nature of the Durand Line creates a structural disconnect between the governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan. The adoption of a “nationalist” framework in Taliban politics will also impact the fortunes of ISI’s “veritable arm” – the Haqqani Network²¹. After the Taliban takeover in August 2021, the ISI intervention succeeded in quelling the factional rivalry and secured the prominent positions for its allies in the Haqqani Network. Thus, the selection of Sirajuddin Haqqani as the Minister of Interior was among the most prominent position allocated to the Haqqani Network. However, the resurgence of the Durand Line dispute and the associated nationalist Pashtun discourse would limit Sirajuddin’s influence upon Pakistan’s strategic fortunes in Afghanistan. The reports of the arrest of Pakistani soldiers even in the Haqqani stronghold of Paktika province are an important pointer in this direction²².

3. *The Road Ahead*

After six months of its takeover, the Taliban has stabilised its interim government in Afghanistan. The Taliban regime has tried to balance its factional interests to ensure regime stability. At the same time, it has not hesitated to communicate its red lines to its neighbours. Thus, while tension with Pakistan remains evident, the Taliban has also had a border clash with Iran²³ and a war of words with Tajikistan²⁴. On the other hand, the Taliban is trying to curate its image as a responsible government by initiating talks with regional countries on the issue of inclusivity and women's rights. Thus, in a recent interaction with the European Union delegation, the Taliban has committed to opening schools and colleges for male and female students and respecting the current Afghan constitution²⁵. Though the value of such commitments remains open to question, it has allowed international engagement with the Taliban government, especially on the issue of averting the humanitarian disaster in Afghanistan. The EU's decision to re-established its physical presence in Afghanistan²⁶ and a recent sanctions relief announced by the US treasury²⁷ indicates the acknowledgement without formal recognition of the need to work with the Taliban government to safeguard Afghan lives.

The nationalist turn of the Taliban indicates that much like the past Afghan governments, the issue of the Durand Line will continue to haunt the Afghanistan-Pakistan relationship. In this regard, the ISI's decades of jihadi investments in the Haqqani Network to acquire influence in Afghanistan will become helpful for Pakistan. Nonetheless, the pressure on Sirajuddin Haqqani to stand with the Pashtun nation will gradually increase and impact his relationship with the ISI. However, with a range of licit and illicit business interests in Pakistan²⁸ and the deep-rooted backing for the ISI's Islamisation project, the Haqqanis are likely to toe the ISI's line. The ISI will also need Sirajuddin's help in bringing the TTP to the table.

However, the sympathy in the Afghan Taliban for the TTP means that it will remain difficult for the ISI to counter the growing terrorist menace, which will lead Islamabad to provide covert support to anti-Taliban groups like IS-K. Though the TTP and IS-K have a history of working together, the TTP has started sketching distance from the Islamic State offshoot. For Pakistan's security establishment, surrendering to the TTP demands would erase the counter-insurgency gains of the past. This means that the rise of Pashtun nationalism among the Taliban and the TTP insurgency in Pakistan will make Islamabad pay the cost of gaining its strategic depth.

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