

Prospects for Resolving the “Durand Line” Problem

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necessary to promote stability and cooperation between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Abstract: *This study aims to analyze the prospects for resolving the long-standing Durand Line border dispute between Afghanistan and Pakistan, which has remained one of the most critical issues affecting bilateral relations and regional stability. Using qualitative methods with comparative and content analysis, the research draws upon scholarly works, historical documents, and expert opinions regarding the historical, political, and legal aspects of the border conflict. The results indicate that despite numerous initiatives and proposals—including the creation of joint commissions, international mediation, or the adoption of soft-border models—no practical progress has been achieved in resolving the issue. Armed clashes continue to occur in border areas, while the return of the Taliban in 2021 further complicated the conflict. The study also finds that external actors and geopolitical rivalries have made the conflict more complex, hindering long-term solutions. In conclusion, the Durand Line dispute is unlikely to be resolved in the near future. However, potential solutions may lie in bilateral negotiations, international legal mechanisms, or regional platforms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. A diplomatic and institutional approach, rather than confrontation, is*

Keywords: Durand Line, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Border Conflict, Regional Security

Introduction

The border between Afghanistan and Pakistan is one of the most dangerous and still unresolved mysteries in the world. In a certain sense, this border became a “Great Game” intersection between major power centers of the Afghan state and led to its fall into the vortex of long-term conflicts. One of such problems inherited from the “Great Game” is the unresolved border conflict between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Pakistan has the largest territorial border with Afghanistan. For comparison, Afghanistan’s border with Pakistan is larger than its common border with Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and China. Indeed, the boundary factor is vital for both sides. In turn, the border issue between Afghanistan and neighboring countries, specifically with Pakistan, remains unresolved, leading to continued instability in those areas. This is one of the main reasons that has led to the expansion and even deep rooting of a number of problems in Afghanistan.

Before the establishment of the Pakistani state, the Afghan border was controlled under agreements with British India. At that time, conflicts and attempts to break away from the State frequently occurred in these regions. In particular, the Pashtuns’ claims for Pashtunistan, the Baluchis’ claims for Baluchistan, and various other intertribal alliances ultimately prompted the British Empire to resolve border issues in this region. After the establishment of the state of Pakistan, the problem became even more severe.

Methodology

The border between Afghanistan and Pakistan – the “Durand line” dispute was deeply studied by Pakistani scholar Luftur Rehman, who in his doctoral dissertation on the topic “Durand agreement: implications for Pak-Afghan relations” writes his analytical reflections on the formation of this problem and its history up to 2018, the position and approaches of Afghanistan and Pakistan to the “Durand line”.

The doctoral dissertation of Sahak Nabi, one of the scholars was born in Afghanistan who studied the “Durand Line”, is entitled “The Origins of Anglo-Afghan relations: clarifying the political status of Durand line 1893-2021”, in which the historical, legal, and political aspects of the disputed border between Afghanistan and Pakistan – the “Durand line” – are thoroughly analyzed. He also notes that this line was established on the basis of an agreement between the aforementioned historical figures, as a result of which about half of Afghanistan’s pashtun population lost a significant portion of land in areas such as Swat, Bajaur, Waziristan, Chagay, and the Khyber Pass. According to the scholar, the “Durand line” remains an “unresolvable knot” due to legal uncertainties, ethnic-national claims, and geopolitical rivalries. S.Nabi recommends reviewing existing approaches.

One of the experts on Afghanistan, Suhrob Buronov, in his monograph “The Impact of the Taliban Factor on the Regional Security of Central Asia”, specifically addresses the issue of the “Durand line”. In his opinion, this line is the “key” to the Afghan problem, and therefore the scientist defines it as the “Pandora’s box of Afghanistan”. In particular, S.Buronov’s article “The Durand line – key of the Afghan problem” details valuable information on this problem.

This article employs comparative and content analysis methods.

A number of proposals have been put forward by local and foreign scientists, politicians, and experts to resolve the main problem between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In particular, according to the Russian political scientist D.Verkhoturov, the main reason of instability in the region is the unfinished formation of Pashtun national statehood. This is the result of British policy. There are three ways to solve this problem:

- a. The first way is to turn Afghanistan into a Pashtun state;
- b. The second method is the creation of an Afghan-Pakistani confederation around the “Durand line”;
- c. The third option is to practically test the leaders of “Pakistan” in the “Free Zone” on the Afghan-Pakistani border.

These methods of solving the issue significantly weaken Afghanistan and Pakistan and lead to the loss of a certain part of the country’s territory[1]. In his article, Boston University professor Hussein Haqqani stated that “Afghanistan and Pakistan must eliminate border tensions and establish open, diplomatic relations in place of the conspiracy and violence left over from the Great Game. An agreement between Pakistan and Afghanistan, mediated by the USA, to end the covert disagreement on the “Durand line” and international guarantees to stop Pakistan’s interference in Afghanistan’s internal affairs could become the basis for lasting peace and friendship between the two Muslim states”[2]. Some experts point to the following two ways to solve the “Pashtun” problem:

- a. First, the creation of two Pashtun autonomy at the “Durand line”;
- b. The second is the elimination of the “Durand line”, the unification of the Pashtun people, and the creation of a new independent state of Afghanistan on the current Afghan-Pakistani border[3]. Naturally, Islamabad opposes this and prioritizes eliminating threats to Pakistan’s territorial integrity as its priority.

Furthermore, according to experts’ analysis, the international community needs to review the current Pakistan–Afghanistan border and facilitate reconciliation processes; otherwise, the region risks becoming an even greater flashpoint for conflict. The countless serious problems faced by the Afghan-Pakistani border appear to Islamabad and Kabul not only as a guarantee of sharp conflicts in the past, but also as an alarming threat, since the time has come to restore relations and jointly resolve these problems. The solution for disputed boundaries, such as the “Durand line” lies not in continuing the policy of confrontation, but in new strategies for developing cooperation. The two countries should develop guidelines to ensure a peaceful and prosperous future for the region, cooperate in combating non-state and state actors operating at the border, and aim to protect the interests of the local population to achieve a comprehensive agreement[4]. Meanwhile, the resolution of the border issue between the two countries through international legal means is also relevant. Specifically, the Helsinki Accords, signed in 1975 by 35 states, can play a significant role in resolving the “Pashtun and Kashmir” issues in South Asia. Most scholars studying the region believe that ensuring international legitimacy on the “Durand line” between Afghanistan and Pakistan is the only possible solution to eliminate this border conflict. The Helsinki International Conference can give impetus to the leaders of Pakistan and Afghanistan to initiate bilateral border negotiations, and in these processes, the International Court of Justice in The Hague can assist the parties in reaching a final resolution[5]. However, this court has not yet issued any specific rulings on this issue and has not expressed its position. Given its “role” in resolving the Palestinian-Israeli, Kashmiri, and Crimean conflicts, the involvement of the International Hague Court on the “Durand line” problem is unlikely to be of significant importance.

In his article, expert S.Buronov put forward the following proposals for solving the “Durand line” problem: “Undoubtedly, the “Durand line” is the root of the Afghan problem and the key to its solution. The “Durand line” is a negative consequence of the colonial regime and the “Great Game”. This is a historical mistake and should be resolved on the basis of mutual agreement and cooperation of the most powerful states, directly responsible for the current conflict on the Afghan-Pakistani border. The The time has come for a “Solomonic way” (Solomon’s Court - this phrase is used in the sense of judging someone with wisdom and thereby determining the truth. The history of the phrase is as follows: According to biblical stories, one day two women came to the wise king Solomon with a complaint. One of them started, we had sons of the same age and similar to each other. Yesterday my friend strangled her son in his sleep. And now she insisted that my son was her own. The second one said the same thing, blaming the first woman. Then Solomon called the young man to him, drew his sword, and said: “I will now cut this young man in two. Then the young man’s real mother says, “Stop, alright, give my son to him,” while the other

says “split him in half, neither to me nor to her.” Thus Solomon identifies the young man’s real mother and returns the child to her.) [6] which will benefit all countries in the region in the future. If the UN creates a “SCAP” working group (composed of the first letters of the words Security Council + Afghanistan and Pakistan), it would be more effective as an alternative solution to the Afghan problem. The essence of this initiative is that the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, along with the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan, are to resolve border issues through political negotiations. In our opinion, the UN “SCAP” working group should focus on the following: resolving the “Durand line” issue based on international law; determining the legal status of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP); and adopting a UN Security Council resolution on border issues between Afghanistan and Pakistan”[7].

According to the views of the prominent Pakistani historian Lutfur Rahman on the solution of the “Durand line” problem, Afghanistan and Pakistan should approach the Durand border as a shared issue requiring a joint solution. Afghanistan must recognize this line as an international border, and Pakistan, in turn, must take into account the concerns of Afghanistan and guarantee non-interference in its internal affairs[8]. Indeed, Kabul’s failure to officially recognize the “Durand line” as a border and Islamabad’s attempts to bring Afghanistan into its sphere of influence (through support for the Taliban in 1996-2001) to gain a “strategic depth” have ensured a constant clash of interests between the countries. In particular, the current (from 2021 to the present) Taliban rule, their military capabilities, and their firm and sharp stance on the border issue are causing serious concern for Pakistan.

Result and Discussion

Recently, several incidents have occurred across the “Durand line” between Afghanistan and Pakistan, necessitating a swift resolution of the conflict by officials from both sides. The press secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Provisional Government of Afghanistan, Abdul Qahhor Balkhi, wrote on his Twitter page that “The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, believing in solving problems based on the principles of understanding, negotiation, and good neighborliness, will resolve this issue through diplomatic channels”[9], but no practical results have been achieved in this regard. On the contrary, various armed conflicts continue in the border areas.

Expert on Afghanistan studies S.Buranov provides his projections regarding this issue: Due to the establishment of the “Taliban” government and the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, as well as traditional ties of influence with the “Taliban,” the initial assumptions that the Islamic Republic of Pakistan will become the main influential state in Afghanistan among the regional actors in the future have proven unfounded. From the geopolitical point of view, the “Taliban,” once a powerful weapon of Pakistan in terms of influence on Afghanistan, after 2021 turned into a force opposing Pakistan. As a result, the “Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan” organization became more active, igniting acute problems such as the “Durand line”, pashtuns, refugees, and the water factor. Therefore, stabilization of the border situation on the two sides in the near future is unlikely, since the borders of

these two states will continue to be a territory in which the geopolitical interests of major actors will clash[10]. In addition, Stephen Cohen, author of the book "The Future of Pakistan" presents his analysis of the prospects of this problem as follows: "The border issue with Afghanistan will not be resolved in the near future. Also, the agreement on the "Durand line" does not eliminate other conflicts and tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Like the Kashmir issue, a coordinated and sustainable solution to this problem requires strengthening stability and mutual trust in the long term, but today such conditions do not exist. External actions to facilitate or compel a solution will further complicate the existing situation"[11].

Afghan scholar Sahak Nabi, in his doctoral dissertation on military research, states his views on solving this problem as follows: "The future solution requires consultation with Pashtun communities on both sides of the line and consideration of European-style soft border models for peaceful coexistence. Efforts to resolve the conflict can only be made through mutual recognition and policies that serve the interests of the people"[12].

Despite the fact that a number of proposals and initiatives have been made, efforts and attempts have been made to solve the "Durand line" problem, to date, practically no improvement has been seen in the positions of Kabul and Islamabad. On the contrary, this conflict escalated and led to several armed clashes between these countries. Even after the Taliban's return to power in 2021, no positive changes were reported on the problem. This means that in the near and near future, the border conflict between Afghanistan and Pakistan – the "Durand line" – will not be resolved.

In our opinion, an institutional and political-diplomatic approach to solving this problem can lead to positive results. In particular, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, being a unique platform to which all countries neighboring Afghanistan are members, plays an important role in this process. This is confirmed by the statement of the former Secretary-General of the organization, Vladimir Norov: "The main factor in the international attractiveness of the SCO is its neutral status, the principle of decision-making based on openness, equality, and unanimity, non-direction against third countries or international organizations, respect for the sovereignty of all participants, and non-interference in their internal affairs. Undoubtedly, all this creates a qualitatively new regional reality, excluding block and contradictory approaches to solving international problems. This has a direct impact on the entire continent and the global security system"[13]. In our opinion, if this issue is addressed within the framework of the SCO and negotiations are held between the parties, there is a possibility of finding a diplomatic solution to the conflict. After all, improving the situation in Afghanistan and resolving the Afghan problem has been one of the issues on the SCO's agenda. To achieve this, it is necessary to put an end to the "Durand line" conflict, which is considered to be the "key" to the Afghan problem.

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Conclusion

Furthermore, as witnessed in the resolution of the long-standing border conflict between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, efforts to resolve the "Durand Line" issue between Afghanistan and Pakistan without the participation of a third party, without the intervention of external forces, through bilateral political negotiations can contribute to finding a solution to this problem and be effective in reconciling the countries.

In general, a number of scientists have proposed solutions to the "Durand Line" problem, none of which has yet fully solved this problem. This, in turn, indicates the impossibility of making accurate forecasts regarding the future of the "Durand line" issue. The probability of ending this conflict in the near future remains to be unlikely.

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