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Return to the Durand Line?

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AP

ILL-DEFINED: "Pakistan considers the border as settled and the problem as a 'security' issue, while Afghanistan sees the border itself as a problem and politically unsettled." Picture shows an Afghan family crossing into Pakistan at Torkham. — PHOTO: AP

The recent clashes at the Torkham crossing on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border reflect a deeper bilateral disconnect between the two neighbours

The violent clashes between [Pakistan and Afghanistan on the Torkham border crossing](#) in June seem to have ended — but not the political issue, security tensions and the larger bilateral differences between the two countries. Though the clashes in Torkham were triggered by the construction of a border post by Pakistan on its side, the border tensions are a symptom of a larger bilateral malaise.

Even on its Iran border, Pakistan has planned to construct a border post in Taftan. Though Taftan is not as violent as Torkham, this border crossing is also known for the illegal movement of people and goods. So is Chaman in Balochistan and numerous other border crossings along the Durand Line. Is there a larger problem for Pakistan in "managing" its borders?

Two arguments

Pakistan is right when it says it is constructing a post in Torkham within its side of the border. Besides, Pakistan also claims that it would like to restrict the movement of people across the border and make it legal. Pakistan has been hosting Afghan refugees in millions; though the rest of the world looks at Pakistan primarily through how the refugees were/are abused, the harsh reality is that no other state in Afghanistan's neighbourhood has hosted as many refugees as Pakistan has done until now.

Pakistan wants to control the movement across its borders. It has also been accusing Kabul of not doing enough to prevent the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) from using Afghan territory as a safe haven. Its spokespersons have repeatedly emphasised that militants use the unregulated Torkham crossing to enter into and escape from Pakistan.

So Pakistan asks: why should Afghanistan protest politically, and [respond violently when it builds a border post on its own territory](#)? Its primary argument rests on making the movement legal. Every country has a right to build a check post on its own soil, and even erect a fence along its border.

Afghanistan — from the Amirs of the 19th century to the Taliban and now under Ashraf Ghani — has never accepted the Durand Line as a settled border. Since Afghanistan contests the entire border, Pakistan's claim of constructing a post within its "own border" is objectionable for Kabul. The Afghans fear that Pakistan is attempting to convert the Durand Line into a "de facto border".

Clearly, Torkham is not a "border" problem, but a broader political issue. Also Torkham is pursued as a "security" issue by Pakistan's military. There exists an imbalance within Pakistan's military and political establishments *vis-à-vis* Afghanistan. Since the 1970s, the military, and not Parliament, has been shaping Pakistan's Afghan policy.

The trouble at Torkham

Torkham (along with Chaman across Balochistan) is no regular border crossing. Historically and culturally, Pashtuns living on both sides have been crossing the Durand Line. Many Pashtuns living along the western side of the Durand Line move across (into the Federally Administered Tribal Areas) for social and economic reasons every day with no concerns about legal documents or political sovereignty.

According to reports, around 25,000 people cross the Torkham post every day. While Chaman and Torkham are major crossing points, there are numerous other points from Bajaur to South Waziristan. The Afghans see this as a "social" border, hence object to any legal sanctification until the border is politically approved by both countries.

Afghanistan is also apprehensive that making the border point in Torkham completely legal and document-based will affect the larger movement of Pashtuns across the Durand Line difficult and selective. While Pakistan's emphasis is on the Afghan refugees living on its side of the border, and the need to regulate, Afghans point to Pakistani refugees who were displaced and moved towards Afghanistan, especially in Khost and Paktika provinces. While Zarb-e-Azb and the early military actions in North and South Waziristan led to Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) within (primarily in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa), a section of those displaced did move into the eastern provinces of Afghanistan. Though this cannot be compared to the size and nature of Afghan refugee movement into Pakistan, the issue does remain.

Besides, though there is smuggling across all South Asian borders, Torkham, Chaman and Taftan take the cake. Further, state complicity in corrupt practices along the Pakistan-Afghan and Pakistan-Iran borders further complicates regulation. So when Pakistan talks about strong "border management", it primarily focusses on controlling the "legal" movement of people and goods, while letting the illegal movement go unhindered or strictly "controlled".

Stalled dialogue

The Afghan government perhaps sees this "legalising" of border movement and "border management" as a punitive reaction for Mr. Ghani's hardening stance *vis-à-vis* Pakistan. On multiple occasions, he has accused Pakistan of attempting to sabotage the internal peace process. The failure of the Quadilateral Coordination Group dialogue and the killing of Mullah Akhtar Mansour, leader of the Afghan Taliban, in May within Pakistan have only heightened his apprehensions.

The Pakistan-Afghanistan diplomatic row actually started in late May/early June, before the clashes in Torkham. Protesting the introduction of new legal measures on the border posts, Afghanistan decided to shut its consulate in Peshawar in early June. While the Pakistani foreign office spokesperson commented that the "Afghans are being misguided by those who do not want to see peace in their country as well as in the region," Afghanistan's ambassador to Pakistan threatened to "expose all the secrets pertaining to boundary." Diplomatic back-and-forth before and after the killing of Mansour too hasn't helped calm bilateral relations.

To conclude, Pakistan considers the border as settled and the problem as a "security" issue, while Afghanistan sees the border itself as a problem and politically unsettled. Pakistan wants "better management of the border"; Afghanistan wants to "settle" the border first before managing it through posts and fence. A security solution may only ensure that the problem recurs, as the issue has both social and political dimensions.

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