



# AF-PAK BORDER CONFLICT

DEEP DIVE | DURAND LINE | TTP



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## Introduction – The "Siamese Twins" at a Crossroads

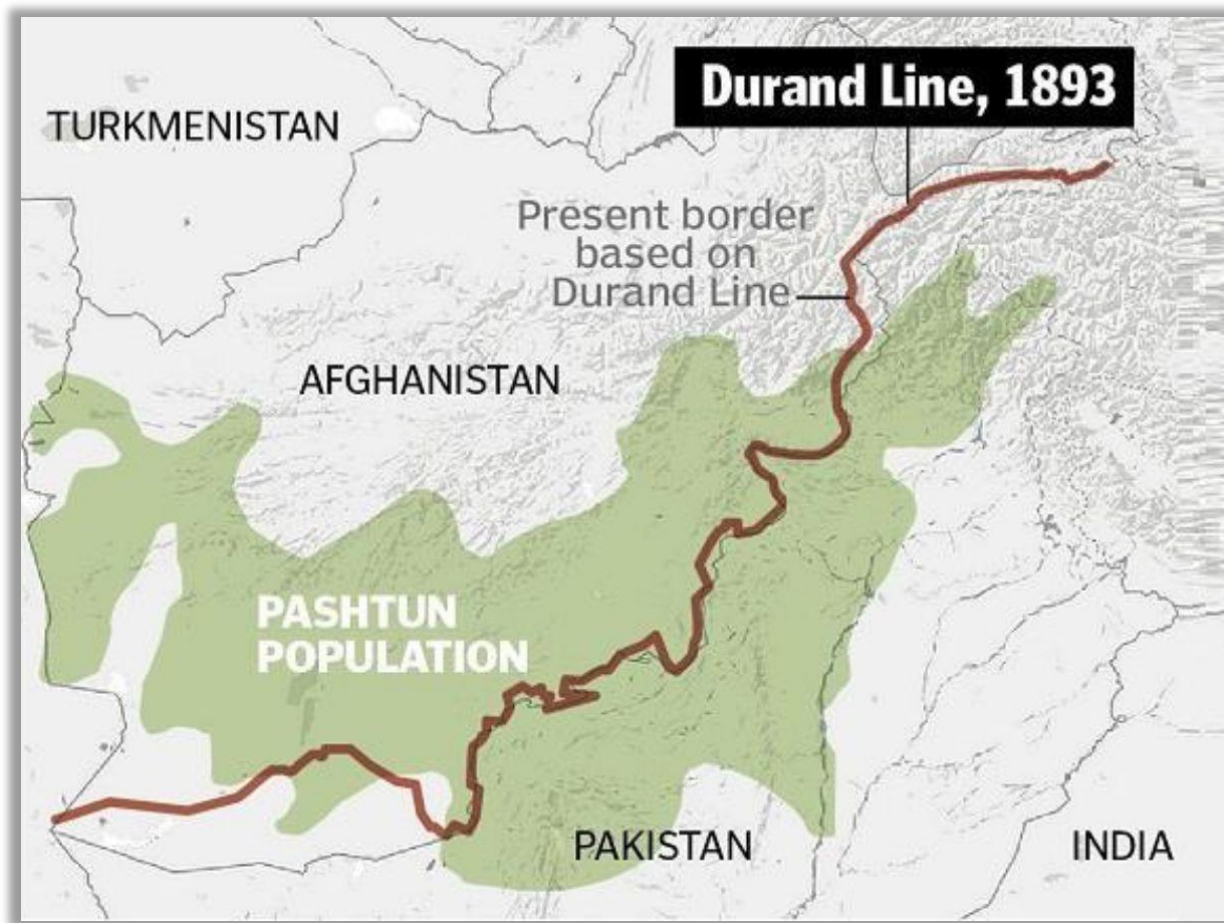
Historically described as "Siamese twins" due to their inseparable geography, culture, and religion, the relationship between **Afghanistan and Pakistan** has shifted from uneasy cooperation to what is now being termed an **"open war."** For a layman, this conflict is best understood as a clash between two neighbors who share the same house—the ethnic Pashtun heartland—but cannot agree on where the boundary fence should be placed. Since the birth of Pakistan in 1947, the foundational friction has been the **Durand Line**, a colonial-era border that Afghanistan has never formally recognized. While Pakistan spent decades trying to ensure a "friendly" government in Kabul to secure its western flank, the return of the Taliban in 2021 has ironically brought the two nations to their most violent standoff in recent history, proving that ethnic nationalism often runs deeper than shared religious ideology.

In the current international landscape, this conflict is back in the news due to a dangerous cycle of **cross-border strikes and humanitarian crackdowns**. As of **March 2026**, tensions have peaked following Pakistani airstrikes inside Afghan territory, which Islamabad justifies as "counter-terrorism" measures against the **Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)**—a militant group they claim is being sheltered by the Afghan Taliban. In retaliation, Afghan forces have engaged in heavy artillery shelling along the border. Beyond the military aspect, the crisis is making headlines because of Pakistan's massive **forced deportation of Afghan refugees**, a move that has sparked a global outcry and created a fresh humanitarian emergency. This "Cold War" turning hot has significant implications for regional stability, dragging in neighbors like India and China, and threatening the security of the entire South Asian corridor.





## The Historical Evolution – The Durand Line (1893)



To understand the current hostility, we must go back to the 19th century—the era of the "**Great Game**." This was a period of intense rivalry between the British Empire (ruling India) and the Russian Empire. The British were terrified that Russia would expand through Central Asia and invade India via Afghanistan. To prevent this, they wanted to turn Afghanistan into a "**Buffer State**"—a neutral zone that would keep the two empires apart.

In **1893**, a British diplomat named **Sir Mortimer Durand** was sent to Kabul to negotiate a boundary with the Afghan ruler, **Amir Abdur Rahman Khan**. The result was a 2,640 km line drawn across the map, known as the **Durand Line**. However, this line was not drawn based on geography or the will of the people; it was a strategic military boundary. Its most devastating consequence was that it cut directly through the **Pashtun tribal lands**, splitting families, villages, and grazing lands into two different political entities. This created an "unnatural" border that the people on the ground never truly recognized in their hearts.

### The Legal Dispute: Why Afghanistan Rejects It

When Pakistan was created in 1947, it "inherited" the Durand Line as its official western border. However, Afghanistan immediately challenged this. The Afghan argument, which remains consistent even under the Taliban today, is built on three simple points:





1. **Imposed Under Pressure:** They argue the 1893 agreement was signed by the Amir under British colonial pressure and was never a "treaty between equals."
2. **A Lease, Not a Border:** Many Afghan historians claim the agreement was only a **100-year lease** of territory, which they believe expired in 1993. Pakistan, however, rejects this, stating there is no "expiry clause" in the original document.
3. **The Pashtun Factor:** Since the line divides the Pashtun people—the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan—Kabul has historically advocated for "**Pashtunistan**" (a unified homeland for Pashtuns). This is why, in 1947, Afghanistan was the **only country in the world** to vote against Pakistan's entry into the United Nations.

## Pakistan's Perspective: The Quest for Stability

For Pakistan, the Durand Line is a non-negotiable, internationally recognized sovereign border. From their viewpoint, if they were to give up the Durand Line, they would lose nearly half of their territory (the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan provinces). To protect this border, Pakistan has spent decades trying to ensure that whoever rules Kabul is "pro-Pakistan." They hoped that by supporting the Taliban, they would finally get a government that would recognize the border. Instead, they discovered that **Afghan Nationalism** is stronger than religious brotherhood—even the Taliban refuses to recognize the line and continues to tear down the border fences Pakistan tries to build.

## The Security Dimension – The "TTP" and the Safe Haven Dispute

If the Durand Line is the "sleeping giant" of this conflict, the **Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)** is the spark that keeps setting it on fire. This section explains why Pakistan's decades-long policy of supporting militants has backfired, leading to what is now being called an "**Open War.**"

### 1. Who is the TTP? (The "Pakistani Taliban")

To a layman, the names "Afghan Taliban" and "Pakistani Taliban" sound identical, but they have very different goals.

- **The Afghan Taliban:** Their goal was to expel foreign forces from Afghanistan and rule Kabul. They succeeded in 2021.
- **The TTP:** This is an "umbrella" group of militants based in Pakistan's tribal border regions. Their goal is to overthrow the Pakistani government and establish a strict Islamic state within Pakistan.
- **The "Brotherhood" Link:** While they are separate organizations, they share the same Deobandi ideology and ethnic Pashtun roots. Many TTP fighters fought alongside the Afghan Taliban against the U.S. for twenty years. This history makes it very difficult for the Afghan Taliban to now turn against their "brothers-in-arms."

### 2. The Current Crisis: Airstrikes and Retaliation (2025–2026)





Since the Taliban returned to power in Kabul in 2021, terror attacks inside Pakistan have surged by over 60%. Pakistan claims that the TTP is using Afghan soil to plan, train, and launch these attacks.

- **Pakistan's Policy Shift:** For years, Pakistan used "Strategic Depth"—the idea that a friendly Afghan government would provide a safe backyard. Today, that "backyard" has become a source of instability.
- **Operation Ghazab-lil-Haq (2026):** In early 2026, Pakistan abandoned diplomacy and launched high-intensity airstrikes on major Afghan cities, including **Kabul and Kandahar**. Pakistan justifies these as strikes against TTP hideouts, but the Afghan government reports significant civilian casualties, leading to a breakdown in relations.
- **The Afghan Retaliation:** The Afghan Taliban has responded with "calculated aggression," using artillery and drones to target Pakistani border posts. This has effectively turned the 2,600 km border into an active frontline.

### 3. The Border Fencing Dispute

To stop TTP militants from crossing over, Pakistan has been building a massive metal fence along the Durand Line.

- **Kabul's View:** The Afghan Taliban views this fence as a "Berlin Wall" that tries to make the illegal Durand Line permanent. They have frequently used bulldozers and wire-cutters to destroy sections of the fence.
- **The Result:** What was meant to be a security measure has become a "flashpoint" for daily military skirmishes.

## The "India Factor" and Regional Geopolitics

For decades, the relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan has been viewed through the lens of a "Zero-Sum Game." This means that Pakistan traditionally believed that any gain for India in Afghanistan was a direct loss for Pakistan. Today, that dynamic has shifted into a complex reality of "Pragmatic Engagement."

### 1. Pakistan's Fear: The "Strategic Encirclement"

To understand Pakistan's behavior, a layman must understand their greatest fear: being "sandwiched."

- **The Two-Front Threat:** Pakistan has a massive, historically hostile border with India to its East. If the government in Afghanistan (to its West) also becomes close to India, Pakistan feels "encircled" or trapped between two enemies.
- **The Quest for "Strategic Depth":** To prevent this, Pakistan's military has historically tried to ensure that Afghanistan remains a "client state"—a country they can control or use as a backyard. However, as we saw in Phase 3, this policy has backfired as the Taliban has asserted its own independence.

### 2. India's "People-First" Diplomacy (The Soft Power Approach)





Unlike other powers that sent troops, India's involvement in Afghanistan has been almost entirely developmental. This has created immense "goodwill" among the Afghan people.

- **Major Projects:** India invested over **\$3 billion** in projects like the **Salma Dam** (the Afghan-India Friendship Dam), the **Zaranj-Delaram Highway**, and even the **Afghan Parliament building**.
- **Educational Ties:** Every year, thousands of Afghan students come to India on scholarships. This creates a generation of Afghans who view India as a friend and partner, rather than an interferer.

### 3. The Post-2021 Shift: "Engagement Without Recognition"

When the Taliban took over in 2021, many expected India to leave entirely. Instead, India adopted a policy of **"Calibrated Pragmatism."**

- **The Technical Mission:** In 2022, India reopened a "Technical Mission" (a small diplomatic team) in Kabul. By **late 2025 and early 2026**, this has been upgraded to a more functional embassy status.
- **Humanitarian Aid:** India has sent 50,000 metric tonnes of wheat, life-saving medicines, and even COVID-19 vaccines to Kabul.
- **A Mutual Need:** The Taliban needs India to balance Pakistan's heavy-handed influence and to rebuild their broken economy. India needs the Taliban to ensure that Afghan soil is not used by anti-India terror groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT).

### 4. The Role of Other Giants (China and Iran)

- **China's Economic Interest:** China wants to extend its **CPEC (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor)** into Afghanistan to access its vast mineral wealth (Lithium and Copper). However, the ongoing war between Pakistan and Afghanistan makes these multi-billion dollar investments very risky.
- **Iran's Transit Ambition:** Iran is working with India to develop the **Chabahar Port**. This port is vital because it allows India to trade with Afghanistan and Central Asia by bypassing Pakistan entirely.

## **Trade, Refugees, and the Way Forward**

While military strikes grab the headlines, the real battle is being fought at the border gates and in the lives of millions of ordinary people. This phase explores how trade and human lives have become "bargaining chips" in this geopolitical game.

### 1. Trade as a "Weapon of War"

Afghanistan is landlocked, and for decades, its survival has depended on the **APTTA (Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement)**, which allows Afghan goods to reach the world through Pakistani ports like Karachi.

- **The 2026 Standoff:** As of March 2026, the two main border crossings—**Torkham and Chaman**—are closed indefinitely for commercial traffic.
- **The "Vegetable War":** Afghanistan's economy relies on exporting fresh fruit and vegetables. When Pakistan shuts the border, thousands of trucks sit idle for weeks, and the produce rots. This is a deliberate tactic by Pakistan to put pressure on the Taliban government.



- **The Result:** Bilateral trade has plummeted by **40%**. Afghanistan is now desperately trying to pivot its trade toward **Iran (Chabahar Port)** and **Central Asia (Uzbekistan)** to break its dependence on Pakistan.

## 2. The Refugee Crisis: "Forced Returns"

Pakistan has hosted nearly 3 to 4 million Afghan refugees since the Soviet invasion of 1979. However, they are now being used as a tool of political pressure.

- **Mass Deportations:** In 2025 alone, Pakistan deported over **2.6 million Afghans**. In the first few months of 2026, another **1.5 lakh** have been sent back.
- **The National Security Narrative:** Pakistan claims that illegal refugees are involved in crime and terrorism (TTP).
- **The Humanitarian Impact:** Most of these people were born in Pakistan and have never seen Afghanistan. They are being sent back to a country with a collapsed economy, limited schools for girls, and zero jobs. This has created a "vicious cycle" of resentment, ensuring that the next generation of Afghans will likely grow up viewing Pakistan as an oppressor.



## 3. The Way Forward: How Does This End?

**Institutionalization of Border Management:** Both nations must move away from ad-hoc military skirmishes toward a formal, bilateral border management framework. While the recognition of the Durand Line remains a distant goal, establishing a **Joint Border Commission** to manage local tribal movements and prevent unauthorized crossings can reduce day-to-day friction.



**Delinking Trade from Security (Economic Decoupling):** Transit trade should be treated as a humanitarian and economic necessity rather than a political bargaining chip. Sustaining the **Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA)** without frequent border closures at Torkham and Chaman is vital for the economic survival of the Afghan people and the regional stability of Pakistan's own border provinces.

**Regional Counter-Terrorism Mechanism:** Instead of bilateral "blame games," a regional approach involving the **Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)** or a "6+2+1" dialogue (neighbors plus major powers) should be utilized. This would pressure the Afghan Taliban to fulfill their Doha Agreement commitments of not allowing Afghan soil to be used for global or regional terrorism (TTP/IS-K).

**Addressing the Refugee Crisis with Dignity:** Pakistan's deportation policy should be aligned with international humanitarian laws. A **phased and voluntary repatriation** plan, supported by the UNHCR and international funding, is necessary to ensure that returning refugees do not become a fresh source of radicalization or humanitarian catastrophe inside Afghanistan.

**India's "Strategic Patience" and Developmental Outreach:** India should continue its policy of **"People-Centric Diplomacy."** By maintaining a technical mission and providing humanitarian aid (wheat, vaccines), India can retain its "Soft Power" and ensure it remains a relevant stakeholder without getting entangled in the military conflict between Kabul and Islamabad.

**Enhancing Regional Connectivity (The "Central Asia" Link):** The long-term solution lies in making Afghanistan a "land-bridge" rather than a "battleground." Projects like **TAPI (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India)** gas pipeline and the **CASA-1000** electricity project should be revived. Economic interdependence is the strongest deterrent to kinetic warfare.

**Ethnic and Tribal Diplomacy:** Both states need to acknowledge the unique socio-cultural fabric of the Pashtun tribes. Instead of imposing a "hard border" that divides families, a **"soft border" policy** (similar to the India-Myanmar Free Movement Regime, though currently suspended there) could be explored in the long run to allow local trade and social cohesion.

**Internal Stabilization of Afghanistan:** Ultimately, a stable Pakistan requires a stable Afghanistan. The international community, including regional players like India and China, must encourage the Taliban to form an **inclusive government** that represents all ethnicities (Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks). An inclusive Kabul is less likely to rely on militant proxies for legitimacy.

In conclusion, the Afghanistan-Pakistan conflict represents a structural shift from "strategic depth" to a "strategic dead-end," where shared religious identity has failed to override deep-seated ethnic nationalism and territorial disputes. For India, this volatility presents both a challenge to regional security and an opportunity to solidify its role as a stable, developmental partner for the Afghan people, independent of Islamabad's influence. Moving forward, the stability of the South Asian corridor depends not on military posturing or border fencing, but on a transition toward a "Connectivity Hub" model where economic interdependence and inclusive governance replace the long-standing reliance on militant proxies and colonial-era grievances.





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