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The Durand Divide:
The Border That Refuses
to
Settle

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Abstract

The ‘Christmas Bombings’ of 25 December 2024, saw the Pakistani Air Force unleash airstrikes on seven locations in Afghanistan’s Paktika province, targeting alleged Tehrik-e-Taliban (TTP) hideouts. The strikes were in direct retaliation against a brutal TTP assault in South Waziristan just days earlier, which claimed the lives of 16 Pakistani soldiers—the deadliest attack on Pakistan’s military in years. This latest escalation has reignited tensions along the Durand Line, a border shaped by colonial history but fractured by ethnic allegiances, militancy, and power struggles. This paper explores the historical and imperial legacy of the Durand Line, its role in shaping cultural fragmentation and Pashtun identity, and its entanglement with cross-border militancy. It delves into the region’s enduring security challenges, with a particular focus on Loya Paktia—the most volatile stretch of the border—examining how its unique demographic composition and the recent upsurge in Pashtuns’ racial profiling have made it a hotspot for conflict. The Durand Line remains more than just a boundary; it is a fault line of history, identity and enduring conflict.

Keywords: Durand Line, Afghanistan-Pakistan relations, Taliban, Pashtun identity, cross-border militancy, South Asian geopolitics, Loya Paktia, regional stability, colonial legacy, Tehrik-e-Taliban, Afghan tribals, Khost, Pashtun Tahafuz Movement.

Introduction

Borders are more than mere physical demarcations; they encapsulate a nation’s sovereignty, identity, and collective consciousness (Teeple, 2000). They serve as crucial markers that delineate a state’s territorial authority, acting as barriers against external aggression while establishing a legal framework for governance and international recognition (Rostow, 2015). Historically, the expansion of political boundaries has been a cornerstone of statecraft, often pursued with the intent to consolidate power and influence. This enduring drive for territorial dominance, described as the ‘psychology of political expansionism,’ fuelled the rise of imperialism, particularly in the 18th and 19th centuries (Linzy, 2022).

The colonial era profoundly impacted the modern geopolitical landscape, with Asian and African nations frequently at the receiving end of European expansionist policies. During this period, political boundaries were redrawn by imperial powers to suit their strategic and

economic interests, often disregarding cultural, ethnic, and historical continuities. As a result, many post-colonial states today grapple with borders that remain contested or unrecognised, sparking disputes with neighbouring nations. While diplomacy has resolved several such conflicts, others persist, sometimes escalating into armed confrontations when peaceful negotiations fail.

The Durand conflict between Pakistan and Afghanistan exemplifies the lingering legacy of colonial boundary-making (Aryal & Pulami, 2024). The contemporary relevance of the Durand Line and the conflict surrounding it lies in its potential to become a flashpoint that could reshape regional security and influence power dynamics in South and Central Asia. Today, the Durand Line continues to fuel disputes over territorial sovereignty and ethnic allegiances, particularly affecting the Pashtun communities straddling both sides. These unresolved tensions have significant implications for regional stability, as they exacerbate cross-border militancy, refugee crises and strained bilateral relations. Moreover, the geopolitical interests of major powers, including China, the United States and Russia, further entangle the conflict in a web of competing agendas, making its resolution critical to maintaining peace and balance.

This paper delves into the historical, political, and socio-cultural dimensions of the Durand Line dispute, offering valuable insights into the complexities of border conflicts within a post-colonial context. It begins by tracing the origins of the Durand Line and examining the historical grievances that underpin the current discord, shedding light on the political and cultural landscape of the era, the key actors involved, and the diverse factors that exacerbated tensions and fuelled violent clashes. The analysis then shifts to the contemporary dynamics of the Durand Line, focusing on the ongoing confrontations between militant groups such as the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Pakistani Armed Forces. It explores the evolution of modern warfare tactics, supported by relevant data and statistics, to provide a comprehensive understanding of the current situation. The paper also evaluates the international community's responses to these developments and discusses the implications for India and broader South Asian geopolitics, emphasising the potential regional consequences if these hostilities persist. Finally, it explores the demographic composition of Loya Paktia, the most volatile region on the Durand, as it is predominantly inhabited by Pashtun tribes who have historically resisted the division for it fuelled cultural grievances and facilitated the radicalisation of resistance. Through this holistic approach, the study aims to present a nuanced understanding of one of South Asia's most enduring and volatile border disputes.

Contextualising the Conflict: Imperial Demarcations, Contemporary Resentment

The Anglo-Afghan Wars, spanning the 19th and early 20th centuries, were not only defining moments that shaped the region's modern territorial and geopolitical landscape but also crucial episodes in the broader context of imperial rivalry, known as the 'Great Game' (Hopkirk, 1992). These conflicts underscored Afghanistan's strategic position at the crossroads of Central and South Asia. Amid this tension, one might ask: How did a landlocked, culturally rich country like Afghanistan, with such a complex tribal and ethnic fabric, become embroiled in the imperial contest for supremacy between two global powers? The answer lies in the colonial calculus of the time and the decisions that led to the creation of the Durand Line in 1893—an artificial border that continues to haunt relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as the broader region, to this day.

The roots of the Durand Line lie in the shifting dynamics of the late 19th century. By the 1880s, British India found itself confronting an increasingly assertive Tsarist Russia in Central Asia. With the Russian Empire advancing into regions such as modern-day Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, the British Empire sought to shore up its defences in the north-western frontier and prevent Russian encroachment on its prized colony, India. Afghanistan, located between the two imperial powers, was viewed by the British as a critical 'buffer state'—a region that could insulate India from the Russian threat (McLachlan, 1997; Rubin, 1995). Thus, the idea of Afghanistan as a neutral buffer became a cornerstone of British imperial strategy, an arrangement designed to safeguard British interests without directly involving the British in the region's internal politics (Ahmed, 2011; Nevill, 1912). The creation of the Durand Line was the embodiment of this British strategy. On the other hand, the 'Iron' Amir of Afghanistan—Abdur Rahman Khan, inherited a fragile state plagued by internal revolts and external threats (Barfield, 2010). To maintain his rule, he sought financial and military support from the British, creating a relationship that laid the groundwork for the contentious agreement of 1893.

In 1893, Sir Mortimer Durand, the then Foreign Secretary of the British Raj, was tasked with negotiating the border between Afghanistan and British India to secure the strategic Khyber Pass. His negotiations with Amir Abdur Rahman Khan led to the signing of the Durand Agreement on 12 November 1893, which defined the boundary between the two territories. Delineated as part of this accord, the Durand Line stretched over 2,640 kilometres from the

Pamir Mountains in the north to the Arabian Sea in the south and intended to clarify spheres of influence, effectively converting parts of Afghan territory into British-controlled tribal regions.

However, this agreement was not without its complexities. The Amir himself lamented that the British had drawn a “line of hatred” that would sow discord for generations (Nojumi, 2002). This prophetic observation captures the violent legacy of the Durand Line, as the discontent surrounding the border arises from a combination of cultural, cartographic, legal and geopolitical factors relevant even today.

Cultural Fragmentation and the Pashtun Divide

The Pashtun population is known for its distinct culture and traditions, originating from the southern region of modern-day Afghanistan. The Pashtuns represent the world’s largest ethnic group with a patriarchal segmentary lineage system (EFSAS, n.d.). They share a common ancestry and a deep historical connection, alongside a strong sense of communal and spiritual identity. At the heart of their culture is a moral code known as *Pashtunwali* or *Pakhtunwali*, which governs personal conduct and community relations, especially in rural tribal regions. This ethical framework emphasises values such as honour, justice, bravery, hospitality, self-respect, independence, and the protection of women and the land (Malik, 2016). One of the most important principles within this code is the concept of ‘*Hewaad*’ (Country), which dictates that a ‘Pashtun must defend their land and people’. This notion presents a paradox, as it calls for the defence of Pashtun culture and territory, yet the Pashtuns are often divided by borders, especially due to the impact of the Durand Line, which separates villages, agricultural lands and tribal groups.

Perhaps the most enduring grievance stems from the division of this distinctive Pashtun population, one of the largest tribal groups in the region (**Map 1**). The line sliced through Pashtun-dominated areas, arbitrarily separating families, tribes and trade routes into two political entities viz. British India (later Pakistan) and Afghanistan. Approximately 50 million Pashtuns reside across Afghanistan and Pakistan, with around 15 million in Afghanistan and between 30 to 35 million in Pakistan (Hashimy, 2023). This separation disrupted centuries of interconnectivity, challenging the Pashtuns’ sense of national, cultural and tribal unity.

Map 1: Pashtun tribes divided into different political entities

Historically, no Kabul government has accepted the Durand Line as a legitimate international boundary (Samim, 2024), asserting that it was imposed by colonial powers without regard for the social and political dynamics of the region. The idea of a ‘Greater Pashtunistan’ reflects aspirations to reunify these territories under a single political entity (Bezhan, 2014). However, with a majority of the Pashtun population now settled across the border in Pakistan, the prospects of this vision materialising have grown increasingly uncertain. This cultural grievance transcends mere nationalism; it represents a deep-seated rejection of an imposed boundary that undermines the Pashtun identity.

Cartographic Controversies

Another significant issue arose during the physical demarcation of the Line, which was tasked to the Joint Commissions set up on both sides of the border in 1895. One of the earliest contestations erupted when the Amir insisted that the entirety of the Mohmand territory, and not merely a portion, belonged to Afghanistan (Adamec, 1967). In response, in 1896, the then Viceroy Lord Elgin offered minor adjustments to the Mohmand division but warned that failure to proceed with the demarcation would nullify these concessions. Although the Amir ultimately permitted Afghan and British Commissions to begin the demarcation, he failed to ensure the safety of the British Commissioners from tribal hostility. Some scholars suggest that the Amir’s

actions indirectly fuelled the frontier uprising of 1897 (Rome, 1995). In retaliation, the British took control of the Mohmand territory, including Bohai Dag and the Tor Kham ridge, which had previously been ceded to the Amir as an incentive for cooperation.

While portions of the Durand Line were eventually marked, the demarcation was limited to areas that could be physically accessed, using boundary pillars as markers. These incomplete efforts further contributed to ambiguities and ongoing disputes over the border's exact alignment (Holdich, 1901). Furthermore, the situation was further complicated during the joint survey conducted by British Indian and Afghan representatives, as the maps produced by both sides did not match one another or accurately reflect the terrain (Skyles, 1940). In regions occupied by nomadic communities, seasonal migrations added another layer of complexity, making it exceedingly challenging to establish a precise border.

Agreement Signed Under Duress

Kabul has consistently maintained that the agreement establishing the frontier lacks legitimacy, asserting that it was signed under coercion (Khan & Wagner, 2013). While many historians contend that the Amir was fully informed about the terms and implications of the agreement, it is evident that he faced immense pressure to comply. At the time, Abdur Rahman was heavily reliant on British financial support, military supplies and weapons to sustain his centralised authority, particularly as he was engaged in a brutal conflict with the Hazaras. This dependency left little room for resistance when the threat of an economic embargo loomed. Moreover, the Amir sought to prevent a potential conflict between Britain and Tsarist Russia from spilling over into the Afghan territory, as such a war would have catastrophic consequences for the fledgling state. Confronted with the overwhelming power of the British Empire and limited options for negotiation, Abdur Rahman ultimately agreed to the terms of the Durand Line (Lambah, 2012).

Post Colonial Geopolitical Tensions and Pakistan's Position

As the British prepared to withdraw from the Indian subcontinent, Afghanistan called for a re-evaluation of the Durand Line, which was firmly rejected. In 1947, newly independent Pakistan inherited the Durand Line on its western front and applied for membership in the United Nations; Afghanistan was the sole nation to vote against its admission. Kabul subsequently declared that all prior agreements related to the Durand Line, including Anglo-Afghan treaties that had reaffirmed the boundary, were invalid, given the conditions under which it was signed. Instead, Afghanistan advocated for an autonomous 'Pashtunistan'—a

region that would extend Afghan territory up to the Indus River thereby encompassing significant areas of what is now Pakistan (Harrison, 2008). This demand heightened tensions between the two nations.

Conversely, Pakistan asserts that the Durand Line is a valid and internationally recognised boundary, claiming that it inherited the border as the lawful successor to British India. It further argues that, under the international legal principle of *uti possidetis juris*, the border was automatically transferred to Pakistan upon its independence, without requiring Afghanistan's agreement (Poya, 2019). This principle, upheld by various international courts and codified in the Vienna Convention, establishes that newly independent states retain the territorial boundaries of their predecessor entities (Ratner, 1996; Shaw, 1997). During the Cold War, the geopolitical dynamics of the era further complicated matters. Pakistan aligned itself with the United States, becoming a key ally, while Afghanistan turned to the Soviet Union for diplomatic and military support.

Afghanistan's open border policy regarding the Durand Line fuelled Pakistan's fears that Kabul harbours ambitions to extend its influence over Pashtun regions within Pakistan. These concerns were amplified in the 1990s when Pakistan, still nostalgic about the loss of Bangladesh in 1971, became increasingly sensitive to any nationalist sentiments among Pashtun communities as existential threats to Pakistan's territory, sovereignty and stability.

Terrorism

The porous nature of the Durand Line has created an environment conducive to the growth of terrorist and criminal networks. Both governments have failed to establish effective border control which has compounded the rise of non-state actors and left the region under the violent influence of organised crime. The fall of the Najibullah regime in 1992 and the subsequent chaos enabled the Taliban's rise in 1996 (Coll, 2004). This allowed Pakistan's ISI to emerge as a key power broker, offering financial, military, and diplomatic support to the Taliban, whom Islamabad viewed as strategic assets for securing influence in Afghanistan. Pakistani leaders believed the Taliban would recognise the Durand Line and suppress Pashtun nationalism (Khan, 2007). Instead, the Taliban refused to legitimise the border and inadvertently bolstered the Pashtun identity, undermining Pakistan's objectives. Similarly, the TTP exploited this instability, using South Waziristan to expand its network into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and other border areas. Efforts to resolve the dispute remain stalled by mistrust.

To effectuate these apprehensions, Pakistan aimed to consolidate the demarcation and initiated the construction of a razor-wire fence along the Durand Line in March 2017. The project, managed by the Pakistani military, aims to bolster national security by curbing illegal cross-border movements and mitigating threats from militant groups operating in the region. Stretching over 2,600 kilometres, the fence features barbed wire, surveillance cameras, and border checkpoints (ANI, 2022, January 8; Shams, 2017). This construction was received very poorly in Afghanistan, as then Afghan president Ashraf Ghani dismissed the plan saying that such barriers cannot alter the deep historical and cultural ties between the two countries. Other critics argue that the fence will fail to address the root causes of terrorism and deepen the rift between Afghanistan and Pakistan (EFSAS, n.d.). The local tribal population bore the brunt of the physical separation imposed by the fencing, which disrupted their familial and communal ties. In places like Badshah Khan village near Khost city, the fence divided families, cutting them off from their relatives, homes, mosques and daily routes, hence profoundly altering their way of life (Hamid & Omeri, 2019, March 30).

Current Situation

These historical tensions surrounding the Durand Line have continued to shape the political and security landscape of the region and the border remains a flashpoint for conflict between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The dynamics of border management, cross-border terrorism and national sovereignty have all been exacerbated by the evolving political landscape, where both countries continue to navigate their troubled past while dealing with new realities. Recently, the border has not only remained a point of contention but has also been a critical site for political and military engagements that have serious implications for both Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as their neighbours.

Rise of Clashes on Durand

On 25 December 2024, the Pakistan Air Force carried out targeted airstrikes on seven locations in the Barmal district of Paktika province, Afghanistan. The strikes were aimed at alleged terrorist camps and hideouts of senior TTP commanders. This action followed a deadly TTP attack days earlier on 21 December in South Waziristan, where 16 Pakistani soldiers were killed in one of the most devastating assaults on Pakistan's military in recent years.

The airstrikes appear to be part of Pakistan's ongoing counterterrorism campaign, *Azm-e-Istehkam* (Resolve for Stability), launched in June 2024. This initiative reflects a shift in Pakistan's security strategy, focusing on domestic stability and addressing threats from

militants crossing over from Afghanistan (Hussain, 2024a). Security analyst Amir Rana has suggested that these recent air raids are likely linked to this broader military operation (Hussain, 2024b). Even though Pakistani government officials have been tight-lipped about the attacks, anonymous sources allege that the strikes killed over 20 militants and TTP operatives, including the head of the TTP's media wing, *Umar Media* (Kumar, 2024). However, Kabul has disputed these claims, alleging instead that the attacks resulted in 46 civilian casualties, mostly women and children while asserting that all senior TTP commanders, including *Umar Media*'s leader, survived unscathed (Khan, 2024).

Another significant factor contributing to the sharp rise in radicalised violence, as outlined in a 2022 report by the National Counter Terrorism Authority of Pakistan (NACTA), was the resurgence of the TTP and other militant groups following the collapse of peace talks with the Pakistani government in 2021. In the aftermath, the TTP activated its fighters with renewed vigour, substantially expanding its activities. The report noted that during a single month, the group “increased its footprint and scale of operations,” gaining “considerable ground”. The TTP also worked to assess local sentiment and the state's response, enabling it to recalibrate its strategy effectively (Khan, 2022).

These escalating conflicts along the Durand Line have contributed to making 2024 the deadliest year in Pakistan in a decade, as documented in the Annual Security Report 2024 by the Centre for Research and Security Studies (CRSS). The report recorded a staggering 2,546 fatalities from violence-related incidents, representing a 66% increase from the previous year. Among these, 1,612 deaths—over 63%, were civilians or security personnel, highlighting the disproportionate toll on non-combatants and state forces. These figures (**Table 1**) underscore the growing challenges posed by militant activities, cross-border tensions, and the fragile security dynamics in the region (CRSS, 2024).

Table 1: Statistical Synopsis of the CRSS Annual Security Report 2024

CATEGORY	2024 STATISTICS	CHANGE FROM 2023
Overall Fatalities	2,456	+66%
Overall Injuries	2,267	+55%
Total Violent Incidents	1,166	+49%
Civilian and Security Personnel Fatalities	1,616 (63% of the total)	+73%
Outlaws Fatalities	934	-
Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Fatalities	1,616 (63% of the total)	+65%
Baluchistan Fatalities	782 (31% of the total)	+90%
Terror Attacks	909	-
Counter-Terror Operations	257	-

Source: Centre for Research and Security Studies (2024)

Non-Conventional Warfare Strategies

In response to the Christmas airstrikes, on 06 January 2025, the TTP issued a warning to Pakistan's military, announcing an intensified 360-degree war on security forces in retaliation to the airstrikes. The group seeks to expand its operations to target military-linked commercial enterprises and named specific companies it has under its radar including the National Logistics Cell in Rawalpindi, the engineering and construction-focused Frontier Works Organisation, the Fauji Fertiliser Company, military-run housing authorities, a commercial bank and other affiliated ventures (ANI, 2025). The Pakistani Taliban has also forewarned the civilians to divest from these entities within three months and advised current employees to find alternative employment.

This shift in strategy by the TTP represents a significant evolution in its approach to hostilities. Traditionally reliant on physical violence and direct confrontations, this move towards economic disruption signals a broader, more calculated effort to leverage vulnerabilities in Pakistan's military-economic nexus. The group is aiming at critical economic arteries that support Pakistan's military infrastructure. The organisations named in their statement are not arbitrary but play a vital role in funding and sustaining the military's operation capacity. Additionally, by involving the civilian population in the conflict, TTP attempts to erode public confidence in the state's ability to provide security and stability and ultimately delegitimise the Pakistani military, introducing a psychological dimension to a conventionally physical conflict. This economic destabilisation could ripple beyond the military sector, impacting broader economic confidence, foreign investment and regional trade dynamics.

International Reactions and Diplomatic Updates

India has taken significant steps in engaging with Afghanistan's Taliban rulers, marking a notable shift in its diplomatic outreach. On 8 January 2025, Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri held a meeting with the Taliban's Foreign Minister Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi, in Dubai. During this meeting—the highest-ranking outreach to date, both sides emphasised the importance of strengthening trade ties, particularly through the Iranian port of Chabahar. The Indian delegation pledged to provide “further material support” to Afghanistan, particularly in areas of refugee rehabilitation and health (Ministry of External Affairs, 2025). In addition to its developmental commitments, India “unequivocally condemned” Pakistan's recent airstrikes on Afghan civilians which had resulted in significant casualties. MEA spokesperson, Randhir Jaiswal, stated that ‘it is an old practice of Pakistan to blame others for their miseries’. This

strong response highlights India's firm stance against actions that jeopardise regional stability and humanitarian safety. India's outreach to the Taliban and its condemnation of Pakistan's actions underline its dual approach of constructive engagement with Afghanistan and a proactive bearing for regional security.

Another key international perspective came from former US President Joe Biden, who defended the American withdrawal from Afghanistan, arguing that "the primary objective of war has been accomplished" (Doornbos, 2025, para. 2). In his final speech as President on 13 January 2025, Biden stated that Afghanistan has not become a haven for terrorists or a direct threat to the United States since the withdrawal of American forces. He highlighted that the United States leverages 'over-the-horizon capabilities' to address security concerns in Afghanistan when necessary, and that "going forward, the primary threat of al-Qaida would no longer be emanating from Afghanistan, but from elsewhere" (Stein & Chao-Fong, 2025). This statement underscores a shift in US strategy towards Afghanistan, emphasising remote engagement over direct intervention. It came at a time when the new US administration was preparing to take office and amidst ongoing calls from Afghanistan's caretaker government for a reassessment of American policies.

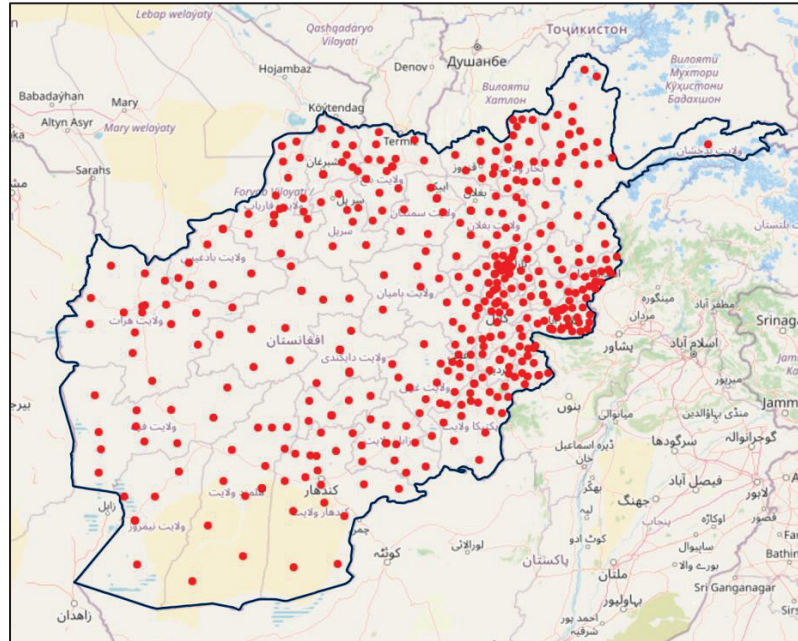
Earlier, on 29 December 2024, Maria Zakharova, the spokesperson for the Russian Foreign Ministry, voiced Moscow's concerns over the intensifying tensions along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, hence marking a notable shift in Russia's engagement with the region. Zakharova highlighted the human cost of the conflict, stating that both military personnel and civilians were being affected by the violence and emphasised the importance of restraint and constructive dialogue, urging all parties to pursue peaceful means of resolving their differences. Russia's intervention in the matter signals growing apprehension in Moscow about the potential regional instability stemming from these tensions, raising questions about its strategic interests and concerns over the broader implications for security (Ariana News, 2024).

The Loya Paktia Nexus

Although the entire Durand Line remains a contested border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, the conflict today is predominantly centred in the volatile southeastern provinces of Khost, Paktia and Paktika in Afghanistan, collectively called the Loya Paktia area (**Map 2**). These regions, adjacent to Pakistan's former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA)—

now reorganised as the Newly Merged Districts (NMDs) since 2018, have been of significant geopolitical importance since the colonial era.

Map 2: Concentration of Fatalities on the Durand Line (2018-2025)



Source: South Asian Terrorism Portal

The locational remoteness of these areas away from the state capital, coupled with the deeply entrenched tribal structures has resulted in Loya Paktia assuming a semi-autonomous status which has exacerbated and impacted the Durand conflict. The rugged, mountainous terrain provides natural hideouts for militant factions and serves as key transit routes for ammunition and movement of fighters, making them critical nodes in the operational strategies of groups like the TTP and the Haqqani Network. The area further makes it difficult for state forces to govern and patrol effectively while allowing local tribes and militants to navigate with relative ease.

Despite its seemingly isolated nature, Loya Paktia is the closest Pashtun-majority region to Afghanistan's capital. Within this region, Khost, though small and sparsely populated, has historically played a significant role in Afghan politics. While some scholars argue that the province has little strategic importance to the country's politics, others including natives believe it to be the 'gate of Afghanistan' which "has a front seat on the Durand Line" (Ali, 2022, p. 2). Khost has long been a centre of resistance, with major uprisings against the Kabul government in 1856-57, 1912 and 1924, the latter nearly toppling King Amanullah due to his Soviet-inspired reforms. Another rebellion in 1929, allegedly backed by British intelligence,

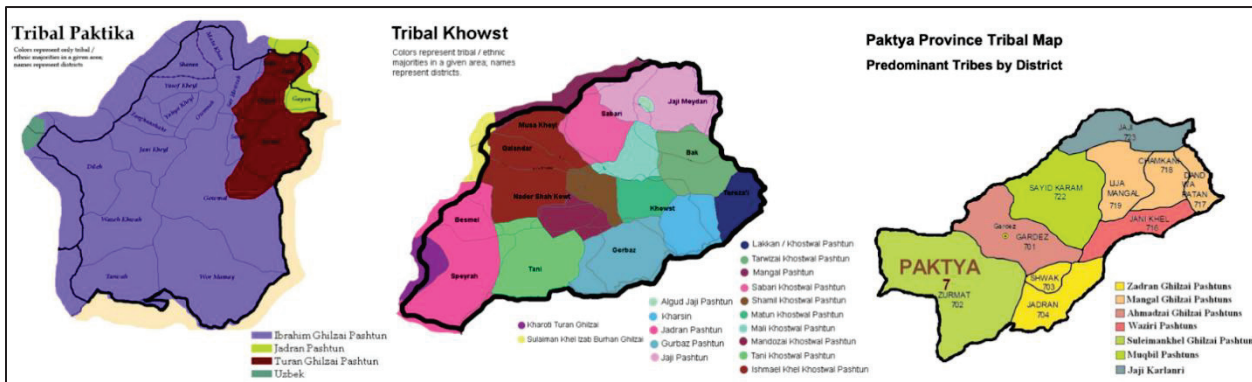
led to a successful regime change (Noelle-Karimi, 1997; Roy, 2015). Further unrest followed throughout the late 20th century such as in 1978, when the Soviet-backed Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) imposed unpopular reforms, sparking armed resistance. In 1980, Khost also became a key battleground in the Soviet-Mujahideen war, witnessing major clashes like the Battle of Jaji, Hill 3234 and Operation Magistral (Ali, 2022).

Khost also played a crucial role in the development of modern militant movements. Osama bin Laden first gained combat experience against Soviet forces in the province and later established a training facility in Zawhar Kili, a mountainous camp used to train his followers. Some scholars suggest that the name 'Al-Qaeda' (The Base) originated from this training site (Coll, 2004). Even after the fall of the Taliban in 2001 and now their return in 2022, Khost has remained a hotbed of insurgency with new factions like the Haqqani Network frequently launching attacks from this stronghold. Understanding Khost's historical trajectory needs to be accompanied by a study of the deep-rooted tribal and ideological forces that shape its conflicts and its potential role in Afghanistan's future stability.

Tribal Demography, Pashtunwali and the 'Kingmaker Complex'

The region stands out due to its distinctive tribal composition, featuring 17 distinct tribes—significantly more than its neighbouring provinces, with Paktia having four and Paktika five (Map 3). Loya Paktia is home to several Pashtun tribes, with the most notable being the Ahmadzai, Zadran, Zazi, Kharoti, Mangal, Sabari, Suleimankhel, Tani and Wazir along with smaller tribes which are collectively referred to as Khostwal (Ruttig, 2009). Additionally, Khost is home to Afghanistan's second-largest population of nomadic Kuchi tribes, demonstrating the deeply entrenched clan-based structures in the province (Ali, 2022). Notably, unlike most Pashtun communities in Afghanistan, most of Khost's tribes are unaffiliated with the two dominant Pashtun confederations, the Durrani and Ghilzai. This relative detachment has fostered a strong sense of autonomy among Khost's inhabitants, shaping their perspectives on governance (The Liason Office, 2010).

Map 3: Demographic Composition of Loya Paktia



Source: Naval Postgraduate School (n.d.)

Khost's tribal history has instilled a strong sense of autonomy and political assertiveness, which Ali (2022, p. 4) describes as their "kingmaker complex", a lasting legacy of their involvement in King Amanullah's overthrow. The non-Ghilzai tribes of southeastern Afghanistan primarily inhabit mountainous valleys, where the scarcity of land has led to the formation of small, tightly knit communities. Their traditional governance structures—led by tribal chiefs (*khans*), intermediaries managing relations with the government (*maliks*), male-exclusive decision-making councils (*jirgas*) and volunteer security forces (*arbakai*), have historically been more influential than those of the lowland tribes. However, decades of conflict, including coups, wars, occupations and insurgencies, have gradually diminished their authority. Over the past 40 years, many of these traditional institutions have been overshadowed by the rise of former *Mujahideen* commanders who have taken on dominant leadership roles (Giustozzi & Ullah, 2007; Ruttig, 2009).

Despite these shifts, southeastern Pashtun tribes continue to uphold Pashtunwali, a notable aspect of which is that of *seyal* (equality) which ensures that no single leader consolidates excessive power—a principle that has repeatedly shaped the province's relationship with Kabul (Ali, 2022; Ali et al., 2021). Throughout history, Khosti tribes have resisted governmental overreach, often launching uprisings when they perceived state authorities as encroaching on their autonomy. One of the most prominent figures to emerge from Khost's tribal resistance was Jalaluddin Haqqani of the Zadran tribe. Though he originally came from Paktya, Haqqani established his power base in Khost's Mandozai District and remained a dominant influence in the region. These tribal communities maintain strong cross-border ties, creating a conducive environment for militant groups to leverage local networks for resources, shelter and propaganda.

These deeply rooted tribal dynamics, coupled with the region's historical resistance to central authority, have created an environment where insurgent groups can thrive. The fragmentation among tribes, their adherence to Pashtunwali's egalitarian principles and the erosion of traditional governance structures have collectively contributed to the enduring instability and ongoing conflict along the Durand Line.

Counterintelligence Operations and Racial Profiling

The Pashtun community has historically been subjected to stereotypes and discrimination for their 'association' with Afghan *jihad* and later Islamist terror groups. Recently, however, military operations conducted by the Pakistani army against militant groups have further intensified these challenges, with reports of systematic ethnic profiling and human rights violations carried out under the guise of counterterrorism efforts (Mohmand, 2024; Shams, 2017; Yousaf, 2019).

The Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM), under the leadership of Manzoor Ahmad Pashteen, emerged in 2018 as a grassroots initiative advocating for the rights of Pashtuns, who have borne the brunt of military operations and counterterrorism efforts in tribal regions. Banned in Pakistan, the movement's key demands include an end to extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, racial profiling and harassment by security forces, as well as the removal of landmines from affected areas (Jafri, 2021; Mohmand, 2024). In 2024, the PTM spearheaded peace marches in southern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa against the resurgence of TTP. The National *Jirga* was convened following the assassination of poet-activist Gilaman Wazir. By this point, PTM had seemingly reached a saturation point in holding mass gatherings and sought a strategic shift. The ongoing violence in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, exacerbated by the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan, provided the impetus for a large-scale assembly to redefine its approach.

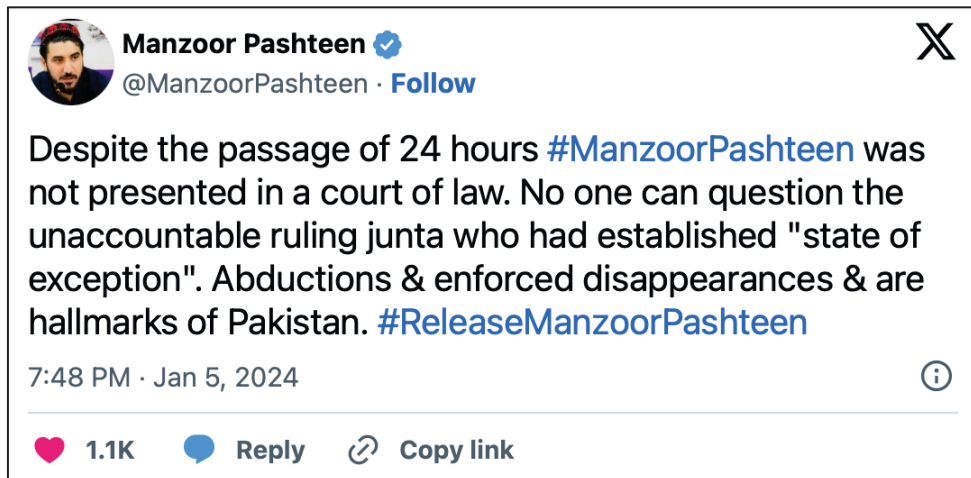
The tribal *Jirga* of Pashtuns commenced on 11 October 2024, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and announced its 22-point resolution two days later. PTM leader Manzoor Pashteen outlined the *Jirga's* decisions, which were widely endorsed by attendees. The most notable demand was the demilitarisation of the Pashtun region through the withdrawal of the Pakistani Army and all armed groups, including TTP and ISIS, from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa within 60 days. Pashteen stressed that since no war had occurred in the region and no external force had invaded, there was no justification for military or militant presence (Yousofi, 2024). The resolution encompassed demands such as cheaper electricity, land and mining rights, the abolition of

internment centres, the return of internally displaced persons, and the establishment of a judicial commission to investigate extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances. The Jirga also called for visa-free trade along the Durand Line, an end to the racial profiling of Pashtuns in urban centres and the reopening of girls' schools in Afghanistan.

Following the Jirga's conclusion, Pashteen launched an extensive mobilisation campaign, engaging with political parties, social organisations, professional unions and tribal elders across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. In contrast, the government employed various tactics to disrupt the gathering, including barricading the Jirga ground multiple times and blocking highways. However, the assembly ultimately proceeded. Unlike past jirgas, which included political representatives and bureaucratic formalities, this one was a grassroots assembly, reflecting the voice of the common people (Nasar, 2024).

According to the Tumuku Development and Cultural Union's (2024) statement submitted to the UN Human Rights Council, discrimination against ethnic minorities in Pakistan remains persistent, with racial profiling of Pashtuns becoming commonplace. The Pashto language has been removed from the educational curriculum in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and its use is prohibited in government offices and institutions. Pashtuns are often perceived as suspects solely based on their ethnicity and physical characteristics, resulting in their legal categorisation as 'fanatics' or 'terrorists.' This has led to targeted oppression, including enforced disappearances, arbitrary detentions, torture and extrajudicial killings.

Rather than addressing Pashtun grievances, the Pakistani state has sought to suppress those advocating for their rights. A prominent example is Manzoor Pashteen, leader of the PTM, whose identity card was blocked and his name was placed on the Exit Control List (ECL), preventing him from travelling. He has also been banned from entering various regions within Pakistan, including Bajaur, Mohmand, Orakzai, Pakistan-administered Kashmir, Gilgit-Baltistan, and Balochistan. On 04 December 2023, Pashteen was unlawfully arrested by a joint operation involving Pakistan's intelligence agencies and police in Chaman, Balochistan. He was detained incommunicado for over three months and subjected to physical and psychological torture (Hussain, 2023). Again, on 05 January 2024, Pashteen, who was granted post-arrest bail by a sessions court in Islamabad, was taken into custody by the Jhelum police and transported to an undisclosed location (**Image 1**).

Image 1: PTM Chief Pashteen's Post on X

Source: @ManzoorPashteen/X (2024)

Additionally, the National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) blocked or refused to renew the identity documents of 1,00,000 Pashtuns (Tumuku Development and Cultural Union, 2024). Pakistan's racial discrimination extends beyond its borders, affecting Afghan refugees, most of whom are ethnic Pashtuns. These refugees face widespread harassment, inhumane treatment, arbitrary detention and torture at the hands of law enforcement. Thousands of Afghan nationals, both documented and undocumented, have been forcibly returned to Afghanistan, where they face grave risks, including human rights abuses, persecution and death.

Pakistani military forces have been engaged in nearly two decades of counterintelligence operations in Loya Paktia, fostering deep resentment among the local population. The prolonged presence of security forces, coupled with heavy-handed tactics, and militarised surveillance, has fuelled a sense of alienation and distrust. For many Pashtuns in the region, these operations are perceived not as counterterrorism measures but as systemic persecution, reinforcing grievances that have simmered for generations.

The consequences of this prolonged military strategy are far-reaching. The resentment it has generated has not only deepened local resistance but has also contributed to a cycle of conflict that continues to engulf the Durand Line. Many Pashtuns, already facing economic marginalisation and political exclusion, see armed struggle as their only means of resistance against what they perceive as state oppression. Additionally, the disruption of traditional tribal

structures and displacement caused by military actions have created fertile ground for insurgency, with militant groups exploiting local frustrations to gain recruits.

This interplay of historical, geographical and socio-political factors has turned Khost, Paktika and Paktia into persistent flashpoints of violence. The combination of military pressure, ethnic grievances and territorial disputes has ensured that the Durand Line remains one of the most volatile regions in South Asia.

Conclusion: Future Trajectory?

The Durand Line is not merely an arbitrary border: it is an enduring fault line of conflict, a geopolitical fracture that has defied resolution for over a century. No Afghan regime, whether Taliban or democratic, has ever accepted it as a legitimate international boundary and there is little reason to believe this stance will change. On Islamabad's side, it remains a persistent source of insecurity, demanding relentless counterterrorism operations that continue to stretch its armed forces thin. The conflict here is not one that can be contained; rather, it is an ever-present, deeply entrenched crisis that has festered through historical grievances, decades of military interventions, ethnic tensions and the shifting allegiances of militant groups.

What makes the Durand Line particularly explosive is its interwoven nature with broader regional conflicts. The growing alignment between the Baloch movement and the Pashtun cause (ANI, 2024) is a prime example of how grievances in one region can fuel instability in another. If instability were to escalate elsewhere—whether in Balochistan, within Pakistan's own heartland, or in the wider geopolitical arena, the Durand conflict has the potential to spiral into an uncontrollable inferno. The convergence of militant groups, the persistence of cross-border hostilities and the undeniable reality that neither side is willing to back down make this one of the most precarious fault lines in South Asia.

Pakistan's internal crises only add to this volatility. Maulana Fazlur Rehman, leader of Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam and a figure deeply embedded in the country's political establishment, has raised alarm over Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa slipping further out of state control. Speaking in Parliament on 18 February 2025, he warned that 5-7 districts in Balochistan are on the verge of declaring independence, a move he believes would quickly gain recognition from the UN. Meanwhile, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, government authority is eroding, security forces are withdrawing, and armed groups are filling the power vacuum. His stark warning, coming from a leader known for his pragmatism rather than separatist rhetoric, underscores the severity of Pakistan's internal fractures. Rehman's warning, coming from a

leader known for his political pragmatism rather than separatist leanings, signals a crisis that Pakistan can no longer ignore. With insurgencies raging, arbitrary arrests and civilian casualties mounting and suicide bombings making a resurgence, the country faces a moment of reckoning (News9 Live, 2025).

The convergence of militant groups poses a significant concern for regional stability, particularly for India. Pakistan's established history of leveraging such groups against its neighbours adds another layer of complexity. The adage that 'weapons know no borders' serves as a stark reminder of the potential repercussions. The inward escalation of conflict within Pakistan itself could exacerbate the situation, with historical precedence showing how internal instability often translates into external hostility. Whether arms and influence find their way across our borders with the support of groups like ISIS or others, the implications for India could be severe.

As for the conflict surrounding the Durand Line, the stakes are escalating, alliances shifting and the consequences looming. History has shown that conflicts in this region do not simply fade away; they evolve, adapt, and, when the conditions are right, explode. The Durand Line is not just a territorial dispute—it is a geopolitical time bomb. Will this volatile fault line remain a smouldering tension, or will it ignite into a flashpoint with far-reaching consequences? Only time will unveil the trajectory of this enduring dispute and the world can do little but watch and brace for what lies ahead.

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