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## **Dynamics of Pak-Afghan relations: A post-cold war evaluation**

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### **Abstract**

This study evaluates the relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan in the light of its historical contiguity and explores how the doctrine of “Strategic Depth” impacts the same. It also takes into consideration the impact of changing geo-strategic environment on the relationship with a focus on the US invasion in Afghanistan and the post- NATO power-settlement in Afghanistan. It explores how developments on the security front in both the countries demand a mutual trust and close cooperation in countering the common threat.

This study concludes that power shifts in the region demands strengthening of ties between Afghan-Pak governments, institutionalize stronger mechanisms for bilateral cooperation and put up a united front against the non-state actors. The impasse can be overcome with rational and out of box thinking. This requires a fundamental change in the attitudes in both the leadership and policy analysts’ giving way to mutual confidence between the two countries. In this way, the role other regional actors is also important in bringing peace to the region.

**Keywords:** Pakistan, Afghanistan, Durand line, geo-strategy, terrorism, Taliban and South Asia

### **Introduction**

The Pakistan-Afghanistan relationship has a tumultuous history owing to the unresolved issues of territory and national identity. This relationship is, and has also been, defined by the changing dynamics of geo-strategic environment in the South Asian region. The consequent political and strategic turbulence in the post-cold war era has had a lasting impact on the direction of this relationship. The borderland between Afghanistan and Pakistan gained immense global significance since the incident of 9/11 considered as a hotbed of global terrorism. The tribal belt on both sides of the Durand Line has been challenging for both the countries in containing the threats to their national securities. The porous nature of this Line as well as the shared identity of Pashtuns on both sides further complicates the problem leading to the free flow of terrorists across the border. Both the nation states blame each other for providing safe heavens to each other’s enemies as well as for not checking their cross border movement and taking a decisive action against them.

Adding to the complicity of this relationship is the Indian influence in Afghanistan viewed by Pakistan as a threat to its security. Given to the strategic insecurities faced by Pakistan since its independence, the focus of the security establishment has remained confined to the concept of ‘Strategic Depth’ in the eve of a possible Indian attack on the eastern front. The primary goal for Pakistan in the event of supporting the mujahedeen in the 1980s to drive the Soviets out of Afghanistan, its role in the ‘war on terror’ and the post NATO drawdown in Afghanistan, has been securing this strategic depth thereby making the western front safe.

However, a paradigm shift in Pak-Afghan relationship has been witnessed recently owing to the acknowledgment of Pakistan’s sensitivities in Afghanistan by the President Ashraf Ghani. Further, joint statements and declarations of anti-terrorism cooperation across the Durand Line, delaying arms deal with India by the Unity government led by Ashraf Ghani and the brokering of peace talks between Afghan government and Taliban by Pakistan with the help of China-provided a ray of hope in bringing peace to the region. But this soon faded away and turned into acrimony.

### **Pak-Afghan relations: A historical overview**

The postcolonial states inherited the British legacy of borders, the legitimacy of which was

questioned at the time of decolonization. Such borders were drawn in an effort to relieve the pent-up pressure on the Empire and to stop further incursions by external powers with little regard to the historical exigency and ethno-cultural fabric. The assertion of identity and territorial boundaries soon raised its head and translated into resistance from below. The postcolonial powers in an effort to legitimize their new-found hegemony, impose a firm control over the inherited borders to draw “sharper lines between citizens, invested with certain rights and duties, and ‘aliens’ or ‘foreigners’”<sup>[1]</sup>.

The Durand Line emerged as an instrumentality in the so-called Great Game—the contest between British colonial expansion in India and eastward expansion of Czarist Russia—one that turned the intermediate region into “a cockpit of international rivalry”<sup>[2]</sup>. This frontier became a political football and a major source of tension between Pakistan and Afghanistan since the partition of British India. According to Lord Curzon, “Frontiers are the chief anxiety of nearly every Foreign Office in the civilized world... They are moreover the razor’s edge on which hang suspended the modern issues of war or peace, of life or death of nations”<sup>[3]</sup>. This holds true in the case of the Durand Line, the highly porous and notorious border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. This is because of the fact that this Line and the adjoining areas on both sides has been the epicenter of political and military conflicts in the region and beyond.

Afghanistan became the only country opposing Pakistan’s entry into the United Nations and subsequently put forth its recognition upon granting the right of self-determination to the people of North West Frontier Province (NWFP) and Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA).

In 1949, an Afghan *loya jirga* [(grand tribal assembly) formally] renounced the validity of the Durand Line. The line not only divides the territory of Afghanistan from Pakistan but it also divided the Pashtun community along both sides of the border. In Afghanistan, Pashtuns constitute forty percent of the total population, in Pakistan; Pashtuns represent fifteen to twenty percent of the country’s populace<sup>[4]</sup>. There is also a considerable population of ethnic Balochis living on both sides of the border. This largely imaginary boundary has been viewed since its inception with contempt and resentment by Pashtuns on both sides of the line. According to Shuja Nawaz, “they don’t recognize the border. They never have. They never will”<sup>[5]</sup>. Some describe the Durand Line as “drawn on water”<sup>[6]</sup>. Given the porous nature of the border and the consequent free flow of people. As a practical matter, the border is unenforced and unenforceable. As a matter of fact, “People on both sides of the Durand line consider it a soft border” and “Pashtuns consider it their own land even though there is also a loyalty to the respective states along with a desire to freely move back and forth”<sup>[7]</sup>. The ongoing border frictions are due in large part to tribal allegiances that have never recognized the century-old frontier.

Besides their territorial dispute over Durand line, Afghanistan and Pakistan shares geographical contiguity history, demography, ethnicity and geopolitics which represent their symbiotic relationship. This commonality between these two countries was expressed by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in the following words: “no two countries have so much in common as Pakistan and Afghanistan”. In the same way, Hamid Karzai described the two countries as “twin brothers”<sup>[8]</sup>. Despite such common linkages and such bonds,

Pak-Afghan relations have hardly been smooth and cordial except during Taliban regime (1996-2001).

The relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan, during the Afghan monarchy, remained more or less stable with some fractious moments, such as putting forward by the Afghan representative’s call for self-determination for Pashtunistan and Baluchistan in 1972. However, relations begin to worsen in 1973 following the overthrow of Afghan King (1933-1973) by Sardar Mohammad Daud (1973-1978). Both Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Zia ul Haq encouraged the bilateral contact which helped diffuse tensions. This thaw in relationship came to end when the Communist Party came to power in Afghanistan after a violent revolution in 1978. It was the starting point from where Pakistan began to intervene more directly in Afghanistan’s affairs.

In addition to Afghanistan’s irredentist claims on Durand Line, there are other reasons that kept the relations always swinging between the two extremes between the two countries. The geo-strategic location of both the countries as well as the geopolitical and economic interests of the external and regional powers coupled with the lack of democratic governments played a role in shaping and reshaping the relations. The Indian factor has also played an important role in determining the dynamics of relations between the two countries. Pakistan and India have been locked in a primary rivalry on many fronts, especially with Kashmir as the core issue for both states.

The relationship took an uneven turn in the eighties following the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan and the Pakistan’s subsequent alliance with Mujahedeen and the US in association with the Saudi Arabia. There were various factors which led Pakistan to take a proactive role in Afghanistan in the 1980’s: Pakistan’s fears that the Communist power at its Western border would be troublesome and might advance to accumulate the warm water of Indian Ocean thereby putting the country’s sovereignty in jeopardy; Afghan crisis provided Zia’s legitimacy to his rule with the support of the religious groups and the opportune moment to gain ‘strategic depth’ in Afghanistan in the event of a possible attack on the eastern front by its arch rival India. So, Pakistan had strategic interests in Afghanistan for it provided strategic depth<sup>[9]</sup> to Pakistan.

### Strategic depth

In order to ascertain its influence in Afghanistan, Pakistan had long been trying to have friendly governments which could toe her line as far as the Durand Line is concerned. The strategic interests in Afghanistan led it to take a proactive role in the 1980’s.

The policy makers of Pakistan considered their country to be a narrow strip of land along the plains of the Indus River that could be severed into two by a deep hitting attack on the eastern front by India. They are of the opinion that, in such a scenario, Afghanistan could form an area of retreat and regrouping for Pakistani forces, providing ample time, from where to launch their counter-offensive. In order this doctrine to be implemented; it would require a friendly Afghan government that would allow its territory to be violated if a war between India and Pakistan were to flare up. At the very least, the Pakistani military sought an Afghan border that would not threaten her western front in the event of any conflict with India. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the consequent appearance of the

Central Asian Republics, a new objective to the concept of “strategic depth” got added: a friendly regime in Afghanistan would open up the door for Pakistan to the energy products and markets of Central Asia whilst also being a hurdle for India<sup>[10]</sup>.

Towards the end of the 1990s, despite fighting in Afghanistan with the Northern Alliance supported by India and Iran, Pakistan finally achieved its aim of “strategic depth” in Afghanistan. The Taliban regime owed its rise to power to Pakistani support and largely depended on Islamabad. Nonetheless, the Taliban did not abandon the traditional Afghan claim to Pakistani tribal areas, nor did they recognise the Durand Line, proving not to be the docile ally that Islamabad had hoped for. However, the objective of minimising a threat on the western front was achieved<sup>[11]</sup>.

This strategic depth must be looked in two phases: the first phase was from 1947 to the NATO drawdown from Afghanistan in 2014; the second phase of the strategic depth is from 2014 onwards. The main difference between these two phases is that while Pakistan wanted a client Afghanistan state, a Vassal in the first phase of the doctrine, in the second phase, Pakistan wanted Afghanistan a stable and peaceful country so that its western borders remain safe and stable.

Pakistan’s support for the Taliban was certainly not based on any ideological consideration. It was based on purely geo-strategic reasons, aimed at asserting Pakistan’s influence over Afghanistan. The main objective was to get strategic depth vis-à-vis India and to isolate Iran. Pakistan’s military strategists believed that a Pashtun friendly government in Afghanistan could provide a strategic advantage in the event of war with India. But the rise to power of the Taliban did not achieve this objective, as the Taliban refused to accept a client position<sup>[12]</sup>.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan once again put Pakistan in a prominent place in superpower politics turning it into a frontline state in the war against the Soviet Union. The war was waged through an alliance with fundamentalist Islamists including the Taliban and Osama bin Laden<sup>[13]</sup>.

The intensification of relations between both official and unofficial Pakistani actors and Afghan Islamists predated 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The process began in the early 1970’s under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto who clearly must be considered the first politician to have played the Islamist card, not only on the domestic political scene but also along Pakistan’s borders. But it was Zia who took this unholy alliance on a new dimension and reached such propositions as to upset the entire regional balance.

Ahmed Rashid estimates that “Between 1982 and 1992 some 3500 Muslim radicals, North a from forty three Islamic countries in the Middle East, North and East Africa, Central Asia and the Far East would push their baptism under fire with the Afghan mujahedeen. Tens of thousands more foreign Muslim radicals came to study in the hundreds of new madrassas that Zia’s military government began to fund in Pakistan and along the foreign border<sup>[14]</sup>.”

The alliance of foreign, Afghan and Pashtun mujahedeen together with military and financial backing from the United States and Saudi Arabia enabled the ISI to complete the first phase of its plan in 1989, after the years of war, which was to drive the Soviets out of Afghanistan and ensure “strategic depth” there. This objective implied, however, installing a friendly government in Afghanistan.

Since 1980’s Pakistan’s importance to American strategic interests in Afghanistan had prevailed over criticism of its nuclear program. The Soviet withdrawal reduced Pakistan’s strategic value for the United States. From being the “most-allied ally” of the 1950’s to the staging post of “jihad” against the Soviets in the 1980’s, Pakistan along with the rest of South Asia had by early 1990’s slipped, in the words of one American analyst, to “near bottom of our priorities<sup>[15]</sup>.”

This end of the Cold War led to a dramatic change in the geostrategic context with lasting impact and its legacies visible in Pakistan. The blowback effects of the Afghan war had promoted the rampant gun culture, drug trafficking, criminal mafias, sectarian violence, etc. Pakistan entered into a turbulent decade of political instability, near bankruptcy, international isolation, and a hardening jihadi culture—a period during which it remained dangerously adrift<sup>[16]</sup>.

Moreover, the Taliban gradually followed an independent path in its operations and working thereby sidelining Pakistan’s influence. Ahmed Rashid dates the start of this process to 1997, considering that it coincided with the handover of foreign mujahedeen training camp management to Al Qaeda. In the late 1990’s, the Pakistani security establishment had every reason to be worried about the newfound independence of a jihadist trend it had largely helped to cultivate<sup>[17]</sup>. Pakistan rather than being the master of the Taliban was instead becoming its victim<sup>[18]</sup>. The unintended consequences of the doctrine of “Strategic Depth”.

### Policy shift

The shift in the policies of Pakistan as witnessed in the recent times has come in the wake of the structure of international system. The structure is such that Pakistan cannot help but wants to have a peaceful western border.

The nature and the character of ‘strategic depth’ have changed over the course of time. In the contemporary scenario, Pakistan doesn’t want Afghanistan as a client state but demands a peaceful western neighbor which in turn benefits to the exigency of Pakistan as well. This is corroborated by the statements of Pakistan former foreign minister Hina Rabbani Khar and ex- Army Chief, General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani.

**For instance, Washington Post quoted General Kayani in February 2010 as saying:** “We want to have strategic depth in Afghanistan, but that does not imply controlling it. If we have a peaceful, stable and friendly Afghanistan, automatically we will have our strategic depth because our western border will be secure, and we will not be looking at two fronts<sup>[19]</sup>.”

Taking clue from this report, Shuja Nawaz in a June 2010 report of the Atlantic Council argued, “the army is now moving to a view of India as the less immediate threat and sees Afghanistan offering Pakistan a different kind of “strategic depth” through its stability rather than as a client state or a haven for Pakistani forces should India successfully invade Pakistan<sup>[20]</sup>.”

Former foreign minister Khar reiterated the same argument in an address at the Chatham House, London, in February 2012, when she said: “We will support any and all initiatives that are all-inclusive that are Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-driven... Nothing is dear to Pakistan’s



national interests than peace, stability and security in Afghanistan. But we will not lead, or pretend to lead. We will follow our Afghan brothers and sisters <sup>[21]</sup>.

However, the turning of the events in the recent months has derailed the entire peace process and has shown new Taliban offensive in Afghanistan, especially in Kunduz. Also, the infighting in Taliban between the two factions has opened a new debate. This rift in the ranks of the Taliban may provide the opportunity for the Unity government led by Ashraf Ghani to delay the peace efforts and wait for the outcome of the infighting. This is a dangerous trend emerging in Afghanistan which might engulf the entire region. Further, this would provide the ISIS an opportunity to establish a stronghold inside.

Pakistan's recent shift in its domestic and foreign policy Afghan rethinking is an upshot of the significant transformation in its domestic politics, deteriorating economic situation and worsening security situation in recent years. Pakistan has been one of the hard hit regional states from the continuing Afghan turmoil since the Soviet invasion in 1979. This ensuing turbulence in Afghanistan on security and political fronts had exceptionally grave human and material costs in Pakistan. As of March 2013, terrorism by local Taliban and their affiliates since 2001 had killed nearly 49,000 civilians <sup>[22]</sup>.

The pragmatic shift in Pakistan's regional policy is clear so far as its facilitation in the Afghan peace process in Murre on July 7 between representatives of Taliban and the Unity Government of Afghanistan. Pakistan has also opened up its policy towards Russia and Iran as well. It has also offered a hand of friendship and dialogue to India for resolving all outstanding and unresolved issues to which India has shown cold start. This is the high time for India to respond to the peace overtures of Pakistan at a time when Afghanistan is at the brink of another spell of Civil and Military strife.

However, the Indian policy makers are keeping distance from any negotiations with Pakistan, also doesn't want to provide strategic depth to Pakistan in Afghanistan This highlights the callousness on part of India and its continuity in its decades old policy in Afghanistan.

The raising of head by ISIS recently in Afghanistan is a wakeup call for all the corridors of power in Afghanistan and the regional states-which are stakeholders in Afghanistan-to open a united front against such tendencies and developments which could engulf the entire region in the near future.

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