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Afghanistan-Pakistan Relations Overshadowed by the Durand Line

International borders are an integral part of the modern nation-state system, both as geographic lines and as complex social and political constructs that reflect power dynamics and impact global peace and security. The Durand Line (1893) between Afghanistan and Pakistan remains one of the most enduring and contentious borders in the world. In its "arbitrary" nature, the border symbolizes the complex legacy of colonialism, imperial rivalry, and ethnic divisions. Afghanistan's persistent claims on the legitimacy of the border, the demand of "Pashtunistan", and border skirmishes, cross-border militancy, and insurgency exist as significant sources of problems to resolve between the neighbouring countries. This study aims to analyze the Durand Line by exploring its historical background and major related issues from diverse viewpoints.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Pakistan, The Durand Line, Border Disputes.

Durand Hattı Gölgesinde Afganistan-Pakistan İlişkileri

Uluslararası sınırlar, hem fiziki sınırlar hem de güç dinamiklerini yansıtan, küresel barış ve güvenliği etkileyen karmaşık sosyal ve politik yapılar olarak modern ulus devlet sisteminin ayrılmaz bir parçasıdır. Afganistan ve Pakistan arasındaki Durand Hattı (1893), dünyanın en uzun süreli ve tartışmalı sınırlarından biri olmaya devam etmektedir. Sınırın "keyfi" niteliği sömürgeciliğin, emperyal rekabetin ve etnik bölünmelerin karmaşık mirasını sembolize etmektedir. Afganistan'ın sınırın meşruiyetine ilişkin süregelen ısrarlı iddiaları, "Peştunistan" talebi, sınır çatışmaları, sınır ötesi militan ve isyancı faaliyetler, komşu devletler arasında çözülmesi gereken temel sorun kaynakları olarak varlığını sürdürmektedir. Bu çalışma, Durand Hattı'nı tarihsel arka planı ve başlıca ilgili sorunları çeşitli bakış açılarından inceleyerek analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Afganistan, Pakistan, Durand Hattı, Sınır Sorunları.

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1. Introduction

International borders are integral to global affairs, representing both physical and discursive boundaries between states and territories; they are not merely lines on maps but also key elements in the exercise of power, sovereignty, and governance. In international relations, borders serve various functions and carry implications for states, ranging from security concerns to political, social, economic, cultural, and diplomatic interactions. Colonial powers pragmatically used bordering as a geopolitical tool of imperialism. The Great Game in this context was the 19th-century geopolitical rivalry between the British and Russian empires for dominance in Central Asia, particularly over Afghanistan, which served as a "buffer zone" between the two empires. Thus, to deter a Russian threat to India, the British intervened in Afghanistan during the nineteenth-century Anglo-Afghan Wars to install pro-British rulers.

Afghanistan–Pakistan relations have been contentious with tensions rooted in historical, political, ethnic, and security issues; largely due to its opposition to the colonial-era Durand Line as an international border since Pakistan gained independence from the British in 1947. Given the line separating frontier tribes, particularly the Pashtuns, between the two states, this controversy has posed a significant challenge to bilateral relations. The relations during the Cold War were tense, and Pakistan sided with the West while Afghanistan grew closer to both the Soviet Union and India. The relationship became even more complex following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. The flight of millions of Afghan refugees to Pakistan as a result of the persisting conflicts, subsequent to the Soviet invasion, made the border one of the worst refugee crisis sites in the world. The post-Soviet era witnessed civil war, the emergence of the Taliban, the U.S.-led coalition and NATO interventions, followed by continuous instability, with the Taliban regaining power in 2021, making Afghanistan's modern history full of persistent conflict, foreign involvement, and resilience amid upheaval.

Historically, the Durand Line (1893) has been a vague and porous border, allowing tribal mobility and cross-border kinship networks, while existing as a subject of militarization and securitization. Thus, the borderland regions are mostly evaluated as lawless, ungovernable, and a safe haven for militant and insurgent groups. The Taliban, Al-Qaida, and Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) have used the porous border to launch cross-border attacks and evade capture. The security situation along the Durand Line is thus closely tied to broader regional instability. The porous and contested character of the Durand Line as an outcome of British colonial strategic design has facilitated cross-border militancy, smuggling, and terrorism. Militant groups have exploited the absence of effective and coordinated border management, a condition partly traceable to colonial-era practices in which the British governed the frontier through indirect rule and granted considerable autonomy to tribal entities.

The disputed status of the border has significantly influenced Pakistan's security doctrine, particularly its strategic pursuit of "strategic depth" in Afghanistan as a means to counterbalance perceived Indian influence in the region. The Pakistani military supported the Taliban to secure a friendly Afghan government that would keep India out of the region and provide "strategic depth" against India; this support was motivated by ethnic ties to Afghan Pashtuns and regional rivalries with India, Iran, and Russia (Rashid, 2008: 90-91). Conversely, Afghanistan views Pakistan's actions as interventionist, interpreting its use of the border issue as a pretext for political and security interference within Afghan affairs.

The ongoing dispute over the Durand Line has impeded regional cooperation between Afghanistan and Pakistan, particularly in trade, transit, and border management. Despite Taliban denials of attacks against Pakistan from Afghan soil and urge by the UNHCR and IOM to continue protecting vulnerable refugees, Pakistan launched an “Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan” (IFRP) starting in late 2023 to expel Afghan nationals without legal documentation, 800,000 undocumented Afghan nationals returned to Afghanistan in the year, framing the policy as necessary to address security concerns, linking undocumented Afghans to militant attacks and criminality, and to relieve economic and social pressures from hosting millions of refugees (Islamuddin, 2024). According to UN data, as Islamuddin reports, 1.3 million Afghans are registered refugees in Pakistan, while around 880,000 hold legal residency status.

Given the complex, multi-scalar nature of border-related relationships in the international system, encompassing both conflict and cooperation, reliance on a single theoretical framework risks analytical reductionism. This study, therefore, adopts postcolonial theory as its primary theoretical framework, as it best explains the colonial legacy of arbitrary border-making practices and enduring asymmetries of power. This framework is complemented by insights from critical geopolitics to analyze bordering practices, territorial discourses, and geopolitical contestation, while questions of legitimacy are informed by international law perspectives.

Methodologically, the article employs a qualitative, historical, and interpretive approach, using the Afghanistan–Pakistan border as a critical case study. The analysis is based on a contextual and comparative reading of historical records and secondary literature, comparing Afghan and Pakistani approaches and legal interpretations to assess causation, continuity, and consequences in the evolution of border-related disputes.

2. The Role of Borders in International Relations

Borders play a crucial role in regional and global politics, dividing space and creating distinctions between the “self” and the “other”. Some states live in relative peace, while others face territorial disputes, conflicts, violence, migration, and even war. States build borders as a strategy of isolation by keeping “us” away from “them”, which is seen in the “Great Wall” of China, “Hadrian’s Wall” of the Romans, “Berlin Wall” in the Cold War; creating ignorance leading to fear, mistrust, and conflict (Brunet-Jailly, 2005: 619).

Borders have played a significant role throughout history, shaping the political, cultural, and social landscapes of nations and regions. The Treaty of Westphalia (1648), ending the sixteenth-century religious wars, marked the beginning of the modern idea of a nation-state, which developed with the rise of nationalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Treaty established the modern state system, replacing the overlapping, ambiguous borders of the feudal era with clearly defined territorial borders (Nail, 2016: 142-143). International borders, as defined by the Westphalian system, have set the territorial limits within which a state exercises legal and political authority, upholding the principles of state sovereignty and non-interference. This model of organizing political space with rigid borders was later exported to the rest of the world through European colonial conquest, most notably in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Diener & Hagen, 2012: 3).

Borders have been shaped by geography, cultural identity, military power, diplomacy, and economic forces. While many borders today are the result of centuries of historical processes, they continue to be sources of conflict, cooperation, and negotiation through diplomatic relations, trade, security, migration, and war. Within this framework, borders can be sources of cooperation or contention, particularly when borders are disputed or separate ethnic and cultural communities. In postcolonial South Asia, the demarcation of frontiers, particularly in tribal

borderlands such as the Durand Line, was central to nation-state formation; yet these borders often clashed with preexisting transnational social, ethnic, and economic networks, revealing the persistent tension between territorial sovereignty and cross-border identities.

3. Historical Background of Afghanistan

Afghanistan's history is defined by its strategic location at the crossroads of Central and South Asia, making it a focal point of empires and invasions, and its resilience against foreign domination for centuries. The nation's past, described by conflict, distress, and social unrest, nonetheless presents a complex and diverse narrative shaped by its strategic geographic position along vital trade routes between Asia and the Middle East. Its geopolitical position has made Afghanistan a crossroads of empires, recurrently invaded and conquered by foreign powers seeking to control its territory, while none of these invaders have managed to maintain a lasting foothold, as its rugged terrain and resilient people have consistently resisted sustained domination (Meredith, 2017: 1). The country's harsh geography and fragmented populace have consistently undermined foreign ambitions, turning Afghanistan into a "graveyard of empires" (Jones, 2010: xxv-xxviii).

Throughout history, figures such as Cyrus the Great, Alexander the Great, Mahmud of Ghazni, Chinggis Khan, Tamerlane, and Babur have passed through or ruled over this region, making Afghanistan part of numerous empires and, at times, the center of its own; while its modern political formation began in the nineteenth century, when Afghanistan became a focal point in the geopolitical rivalry between British India and Russia, witnessed by two Anglo-Afghan wars during the Great Game (Barfield, 2010: 1). Despite maintaining the independence from British India after the third Anglo-Afghan War in 1919 and neutrality during both world wars, it remained heavily influenced by foreign powers.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, Afghanistan, like many states in the Afro-Asian world, attempted to construct a Western-style nation-state within a deeply tribal and ethnically diverse society organized around kinship networks and group-based obligations, which often marginalized traditional social structures that had long contributed to social cohesion, thereby exacerbating political instability (Dupree, 1980: 659-661). In this context, both U.S. and Soviet interventions in the post-World War II period sought to impose externally derived models of state organization that largely overlooked local cultural and social realities, contributing to the failure of sustained state-building in Afghanistan.

After decades of monarchy, the 1978 communist coup led to Soviet intervention, triggering a war and the rise of mujahideen forces backed by the West. Thus, the country became a central arena in the Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, culminating in the Soviet invasion from 1979 to 1989. The ensuing civil war of the 1990s fragmented Afghanistan's state institutions and left the country largely isolated and marginalized within the international system; however, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, it reemerged on the global stage when radical jihadists orchestrated the 9/11 attacks from its territory, prompting a U.S. invasion in response (Barfield, 2010: 1).

3.1. The "Great Game" Between the British and Russian Empires

Throughout the nineteenth century, Afghanistan became a key battleground on a large chess board for an imperial rivalry between the British and Russia, in a competition over the Central Asia, termed as the "Great Game" by the British intelligence officer Captain Arthur Connolly who served in Afghanistan and British India between 1823 and 1842 (Hopkirk, 1992: 1; Gregory, 2004: 30). The British and Russia were expanding their empires in the nineteenth

century, and Central Asia was considered a "buffer zone" between the competing empires (Brunet-Jailly, 2015: 3). The power struggle began around 1830 and lasted throughout the nineteenth century, as Russian influence expanded into Central Asia, the British grew increasingly alarmed about the threat to British India, leading to war with the Afghans. The British then imagined Afghanistan as a "buffer state" to safeguard against any Russian advance in British India. The Anglo-Afghan Wars were a series of three major conflicts between the British Empire and Afghanistan during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, primarily driven by Britain's desire to secure the northwestern frontier of British India. The British waged the First Anglo-Afghan War (1839-1842) and the Second Anglo-Afghan War (1878-1880), both of which were concerned with Russian influence in Afghanistan. However, neither war was sufficient to curb Russian expansion into the south toward British India.

The British and Russia agreed in 1873 that Afghanistan was within the British sphere of influence, and the area in the south of the Oxus River (Amu Darya) would be considered Afghan territory, which was the same border established by Ahmad Shah Durrani and the Amir of Bukhara in the mid-eighteenth century (Barfield, 2010: 139). The northern border of Afghanistan was delineated upon agreement through a joint Anglo-Russian Boundary Commission between 1885 and 1887. As Barfield states, Afghanistan thus became a "buffer state" between the two empires; a status established without its consent but advantageous to the Amir as it curbed Russian expansion without requiring further concessions to the British. The British imperial administration considered the north-west frontier problem not merely as a military challenge but as a complex political and civilizational dilemma; the strategy was to pursue a deliberate "middle path", advancing imperial control and preserving Afghanistan as a "buffer state", while avoiding both full annexation of Pashtun territories and total withdrawal from the frontier (Fraser-Tytler, 1967: 270). The British colonial officials, institutionalizing the idea that the frontier was a space of exception with its inherently different inhabitants, developed a distinct administrative system, the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR), designed to keep the frontier under imperial control yet outside the standard legal and political frameworks of colonial governance (Hopkins, 2020: 37). The British had already occupied much of Afghanistan by the time Yaqub Khan came to power, and having limited option, agreed to cede Jalalabad and Kandahar signing the Treaty of Gandamak in 1879, following the Second Anglo-Afghan War, to stop the British from taking over the rest of the country (Runion, 2017: 80). By this treaty, Afghanistan ceded control of its foreign affairs to British India, accepting a British resident in Kabul and transferring key frontier districts, what would later become the North-West Frontier Province (Devasher, 2022: 215).

3.2. The Durand Line: A Colonial Legacy at the Imperial Crossroads

Afghanistan is regarded as the hot spot in Central Asia where three great empires gathered, Persia to the west, the Turkic, Mongol, and Russian states to the north, and India to the southeast; while it offers no sound and secure borders to divide them (Omrani & Ledwidge, 2009: 48-56). The Afghan land has long been known as the cradle of foreign intervention and local turmoil from the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, becoming a scene of bloody wars between the British and Russia, summarized as an imperial imagination (Gregory, 2004: 30-31).

The next step in the colonial bordering process was to secure the eastern flank of Afghanistan to curb further Russian advances into British India. Established in 1893 by Sir Mortimer Durand, the foreign secretary of British India, and Abdur Rahman Khan, the Amir of Afghanistan, its primary motivation was to define the spheres of influence between British India and Afghanistan; in exchange for internal sovereignty and British non-interference in Afghanistan's domestic affairs, by ceding significant territory to the British. It was a strategic move within the context of the "Great Game," the geopolitical rivalry between the empires for control over Central Asia, aiming to create a defensive frontier and "buffer zone" to secure British India's

northwestern frontier, formally determining the limits of Afghan influence and placing the Pashtun tribal belt under indirect British control.

British government sought for a border agreement with Afghanistan upon the settlement of Afghanistan's northern border with Russia in 1888 (Brunet-Jailly, 2015: 4). The Amir, in exchange for internal sovereignty of his kingdom without Britain's interference, confirmed British control over contested border territories already under British administration such as Peshawar or Quetta, and relinquished jurisdiction over a substantial portion of the global Pashtun population beyond the Durand Line (Ahmed, 2017: 56-57). Although the Amir had little choice but to sign the agreement under British pressure, many Afghans never forgave him for what they saw as a betrayal (Runion, 2017: 82).

The colonial legacy of the Anglo-Afghan wars, including contentious bordering practices such as the Durand Line, drawn between British India and Afghanistan in 1893, persists to influence regional politics to this day. The colonial imagination left a legacy in the form of an arbitrary line of colonial cartography separating fractured ethnic tribes and villages, particularly Pashtun tribes, as drawn by Sir M. Durand, who served as the Foreign Secretary of the colonial government of India (Omran, 2009: 183-184). Significantly, with almost no Afghans involved in the border demarcation process, carried out by foreign border commissions from Britain, Russia, Persia, and China, the Durand Line divided numerous Pashtun tribes along with other ethnic groups such as the Tarkalanis, the Waziris, the Mohmands, the Shinwaris, the Nurzais, the Achakzais, the Barakzais, the Baluches (Kakar, 2006: 187). The Durand Line, marking the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, is one of the most disputed issues between the two states; although Amir Abdur Rahman Khan signed the agreement; in the wake of the independence of Pakistan, successive Afghan governments rejected to accept it as an international border claiming that the Afghan territory lies beyond the Durand Line (Poya, 2019: 1-15). The agreement marked the spheres of influence between Afghanistan and British India, effectively separating Afghan tribal territories without a formal transfer of sovereignty; functionally detaching large Pashtun-inhabited areas from Afghan political control and incorporating them into British India's frontier administration.

The main rationale and impetus for border-making were the British "forward policy," a push to secure the "scientific frontier" against potential Russian threats or Afghan instability, and British pressure on Amir Abdur Rahman to agree to fixed borders with India (Kakar, 2006: 177-192). However, according to Marsh (2014: 19-21), the Durand Line contributed to more problems than it solved and could not mitigate the tribal unrest even under British rule; the ill-defined border that divided Pashtun tribes, e.g., Mohmands, lacked strategic value, and ultimately generated greater instability and unrest in the tribal regions rather than resolving frontier issues. The Durand Line, though regarded as a significant imperial achievement, was drawn with limited regard for ethnographic cohesion and local political realities, privileging imperial strategic considerations over indigenous social and territorial structures; it was quickly drawn on the map without adequate understanding of the region's geography, ethnicity, or political situation (Leitner, 1972: 187-202). Nawaz (2009: 14) claims that many states in Asia believe that British colonialists implemented an exceptional social engineering plan to rule and control the borderland by "ruling the Punjabis", intimidating the Sindhis, paying Pashtuns off, and paying Balochis respect.

4. The Contested Legitimacy of the Durand Line

Contradictory approaches coexist regarding the legal status and legitimacy of the Durand Line: while the vast majority recognize it as an international border, others argue that it was a colonial-era frontier defining the spheres of influence, shaped by British imperial strategy within the broader context of the Great Game. Although formally signed by the Afghan ruler, the

agreement establishing the Durand Line is widely perceived by Afghans as a British colonial imposition, signed under duress and lacking both moral and legal legitimacy. Following its independence in 1919, Afghanistan has repeatedly challenged the legitimacy of the Durand Line and has declined to formally recognize it as a permanent international boundary, asserting that the 1893 agreement was either time-bound and has expired, or was concluded under coercive colonial conditions that render it legally invalid. Another key point of contention regarding the Durand Agreement (1893) is Afghanistan's position that, since the end of British rule in India and the independence of Pakistan in 1947, successive Afghan governments have declined to formally recognize the Durand Line as an international border. Simpson (2021: 68) argues that though resistance to the Durand Line was strong, the frontier inhabitants did not reject the border entirely; instead, they strategically used it as a resource, such as by crossing into Afghan territory to evade British colonial violence.

The Durand Line was not widely contested or formally rejected as a political boundary before the partition of British India. The Afghan rejection is largely based on the notion that the Durand Agreement establishing the Durand Line became a "lapsed legacy" upon the British cession of sovereignty to Pakistan in 1947. Following Pakistan's independence in 1947, the newly independent state inherited the Durand Line as its western border. Afghanistan, however, refused to recognize the legitimacy of this boundary, claiming that the 1893 Durand Agreement was signed under colonial duress and coercion, and was not a permanent treaty, particularly after the death of Amir Abdur Rahman Khan, and lacked legal validity under international law. Yar et.al. (2022: 673-686) argue that the Durand Agreement (1893) signed between British India and Abdur Rahman Khan was a "personal agreement" aimed at defining British political influence rather than a formal treaty between two sovereign governments, and it was part of a series of different agreements (1893, 1905, 1919, 1921) that faced ongoing issues, leading to the 1919 Kabul Treaty signed between the two governments after Afghanistan's independence, which annulled previous agreements. Indian analyst Biswas (2013: 34) claims that it was not a binding bilateral agreement to define a sovereign boundary, stating that the idea behind the line, in Sir M. Durand's own words, was not to form a sovereign boundary but to separate the British sphere of influence from the Amir's rule. According to Afghan historian Kakar (2006: 177-192), the Durand Agreement was a "personal agreement" that Amir Abdur Rahman negotiated and finalized on his own initiative without consulting his elders, courtiers, or advisors, and without the consent of national or parliamentary authority. Indian diplomat Lambah (2011: 20) similarly suggests the controversy in Durand's words: "The tribes on the Indian side are not to be considered as within British territory." Omrani & Ledwidge (2009: 48-56) claim that recent archival evidence indicates that the Durand Line was not intended to be an international border; rather, the treaty was signed to determine the British and Russian spheres of influence.

According to the memoir written by the Abdur Rahman Khan, the Amir confesses that he was simultaneously working to dismantle Afghanistan's feudal system and transform it into a centralized, unified kingdom; thus, border demarcation was essential to ensure national security, prevent foreign encroachment, and strengthen the sovereignty of his newly consolidated state (Mahomed Han, 1900: 160-162). The main rationale behind the bordering was not to draw a geographical line, but to determine the frontier with the British sphere of influence against the Russian advance through Afghanistan (Dupree, 1980: 767). From the British perspective, the government's intention regarding the frontier tribes was not full annexation but rather to extend influence and control indirectly. According to former Indian diplomat Dogra (2017: 197-199), the correspondences of 1894-1896 by the British diplomats Sir Mortimer Durand and Viceroy Elgin demonstrate that the Durand Agreement was considered and signed to limit the spheres of influence between the British government and the Afghan Amir without interfering in the internal affairs of the tribes rather than annexation of Afghan tribal territories. However, Caroe (1958: 382) states that the Durand Agreement clearly established a defined frontier of authority between

British India and Afghanistan, ending the previous uncertainty over the tribal areas, even though the British did not intend to annex or directly administer those regions.

Pakistan, conversely, asserts that the Durand Line constitutes a recognized international border, inherited through the principle of state succession; and successive Afghan rulers, including Amanullah Khan and Zahir Shah, tacitly accepted the line by not formally abrogating the agreement. Pakistan, referring to previous treaties from 1905, 1919, and 1921, argues that Afghanistan had previously acknowledged the Durand Line as a permanent border, and Afghanistan's unilateral refusal to recognize the border is invalid, since revision of international borders requires bilateral agreement (Khan et.al., 2025: 423-424). Rubin & Siddique (2006: 13) argue that despite the rejections by the Afghan Governments, Pakistan, following the partition, declared that the border, according to the Durand Line Agreement of 1893, is a valid international border as recognized and confirmed by several Afghan governments. Pakistan's position is that the Durand Line is a legitimate international boundary that ended Afghanistan's authority or influence over the east of the line, giving Pakistan, as the successor state to British India, full sovereignty over these territories and their people. The question of Pashtuns was settled by the British-supervised plebiscite in 1947, to choose between joining India or Pakistan, with almost all of the votes choosing to join Pakistan, in addition to the approval of the tribal areas through special jirgas (Embree, 1979: 134-135). According to Sir Olaf Caroe (1958: 463-466), who served as the British governor of the NWFP of India between 1946-1947, the extracts of correspondings demonstrate that Abdur Rahman Khan, his successors and diplomatic representatives have confirmed the terms of the Durand Agreement, ostensibly stating that Durand Line has been consistently recognized as the official border between Afghanistan and British India, up to 1929 including the rule of King Nadir Shah. Pakistani scholars Jafeer & Saeed (2020: 233-249) argue that the global community largely supports Pakistan's position on the Durand Line's firm legal standing, established through bilateral agreements with the Afghan Amir, giving it strong legal legitimacy under international law; reinforced by the principle of *uti possidetis juris*, the principle whereby newly independent states inherit the territorial boundaries that existed at the time of independence. Pakistani-American legal scholar Mahmud (2010: 1-74) explores the interrelationship between colonialism and international law, marshalling his arguments that international law remains afflicted by its inability to resolve contemporary disputes rooted in colonial border-making, such as the Durand Line, and legitimizes these inherited borders.

From the perspective of international law, the treaties of 1919 and 1921 did not expressly terminate the Durand Agreement, as they contained no provision annulling or modifying existing boundary arrangements. Although Amir Abdur Rahman Khan concluded the Durand Agreement without parliamentary ratification, under late-nineteenth-century international law such ratification was not required for legal validity, and the Amir acted in his capacity as Afghanistan's sovereign authority rather than as a private individual. The Agreement was subsequently reaffirmed, notably in 1905 and in the 1919-1921 arrangements, undermining claims that it was merely a personal undertaking. International law doctrine generally treats the Durand Agreement as a valid boundary agreement, supported by principles of state succession and, by analogy, *uti possidetis juris*, which emphasize the continuity of borders in the absence of an express agreement to alter them, as affirmed by the International Court of Justice in the Frontier Dispute (Burkina Faso/Republic of Mali) (1986).

Pakistan has consistently maintained that the status of the Durand Line is "a closed and settled issue" and an internationally recognized and legally settled border with Afghanistan, a position reaffirmed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2012 and by the Deputy Prime Minister on January 2, 2025, emphasizing that its legality is not open to debate (Shah: 2025). Furthermore, in 2018, Pakistan merged its former North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) to form the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, aiming to integrate

the tribal regions into the provincial administrative and legal framework and extend governance, development, and constitutional rights to these areas.

5. Theopolitics and Governance along the Durand Line

The Afghanistan-Pakistan border functions as a theopolitical space where religious ideology and political authority intersect. The border cuts through Pashtun tribal areas where faith-based identity strongly shapes social and political life, and militant groups like the TTP invoke religious justification to challenge state control or cross the border for insurgencies. Both Pakistan and Afghanistan have used religion to legitimize claims over these territories, while the Taliban's tolerance of TTP activity illustrates how shared religious and cultural ties influence state behavior. In this sense, the Durand Line is not merely a territorial boundary but a zone where the politics of religion, nation-building, and security are deeply intertwined.

While the term "theopolitics" does not have a universally agreed-upon definition, it can be understood as the interaction between religious beliefs, particularly Islam, and political power. This dynamic is crucial to understanding Afghanistan's national and international relations. Barfield (2010: 337-339) challenges the idea that Afghanistan is naturally ungovernable, arguing that instability stems from the imposition of unsuitable centralized governance models on the country, concluding that Afghanistan is governable, but only through a decentralized system that aligns with its social realities and prioritizes political accommodation over administrative uniformity.

Hashmi (2003: 181-182) argues that while Islamic tradition recognizes that humans naturally form social and communal boundaries, Islamic ethics treats these divisions as secondary and acceptable only when they support a universal moral vision. In addition, the Qur'an and the Prophet's sunna emphasize spiritual and moral distinctions rather than territorial ones, offering little guidance on creating or dissolving political borders and focusing instead on ethical and communal ideals.

Afghanistan and Pakistan illustrate Benedict Anderson's (2006: 5-6) concept of "imagined communities" as modern nation-states composed of diverse ethnic and linguistic groups whose sense of national unity has been historically constructed rather than naturally given. The Durand Line cut across pre-existing tribal and cultural identities, particularly among Pashtun communities, underscoring how national belonging is shaped by political and territorial projects. In both states, national identities have been promoted through state institutions, language policies, and Islamic ideology, yet competing imaginations of community continue to influence bilateral tensions. Pakistan has largely emphasized a shared Islamic identity as a unifying principle across ethnic and linguistic diversity, whereas Afghanistan emerged as a territorial state before the consolidation of a cohesive national identity. Its imperial-era borders encompass multiple ethnic groups—such as Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks—whose political and social loyalties have often remained localized or tribal rather than national.

Theopolitics in Afghanistan is correlated with the interplay among politics, religion, culture, and geopolitics, particularly in how Islamic political ideologies and religious governance have shaped the country's political history and its relationship with external powers. In Afghanistan, Islam permeates all aspects of social, political, and economic life; it is not a separate political ideology but an intrinsic cultural and moral framework that governs everyday interactions; thus, this inseparability of religion and governance in Afghan society makes the Western concept of secularism nearly inconceivable; and Islam is accepted as an inherent part of identity rather than a political system to be debated (Barfield, 2010: 40-42).

Islam has played a central role in Afghanistan's political identity since the establishment of the Durrani Empire in the eighteenth century, shaping successive visions of legitimate governance. The concept of an Islamic state has strongly influenced Afghanistan's political movements, producing a form of theopolitics rooted in the intersection of religious ideology, ethnic identity, and political power. These dynamics have been evident throughout Afghanistan's modern history, from the collapse of the communist regime to the rise of the mujahideen and the Taliban in the 1990s. The Taliban, in particular, emerged as a politico-militant movement combining Islamic ideology with Pashtun social and cultural foundations.

Since its formation in the early eighteenth century, the Afghan state has formally claimed to serve all people, yet in practice it prioritized the ruling class while neglecting tribal and ethnic populations; however, this class-based character coupling with reliance on foreign powers for political, financial, and military support, eroded the legitimacy of both the state and its leading role (Emadi, 2010: ix). According to Rashid (2001: 208), centuries-old systems of authority and social organization in Afghanistan have collapsed, creating a power vacuum with no leader or group holding national legitimacy; while national and tribal identities have weakened, giving way to strong regional loyalties rather than as Afghans or members of broader ethnic groups. This lack of authority and social groupings has resulted in deep fragmentation across society, both vertically between rulers and ruled, and horizontally across regions and communities, dividing almost all small populations.

Barfield (2010: 337-339) refutes the assumption that Afghanistan is inherently ungovernable, arguing instead that instability stems from the imposition of unsuitable centralized governance models; stating that Afghanistan is governable, but only through a decentralized system that aligns with its social realities and prioritizes political accommodation over administrative uniformity. To Barfield, historically, most Afghans accepted state authority for Islamic political tradition valued order over rebellion, and effective governance was achieved through a decentralized "Swiss cheese" model, in which rulers maintained firm control in populated and prosperous regions while allowing peripheral areas to manage their own affairs, intervening indirectly through local rivals, trade restrictions, or limited punitive actions when necessary. In addition, this balance of authority and autonomy ensured stability across regimes, while attempts to impose a uniform, centralized "American cheese" model implemented under Abdur Rahman Khan, Amanullah Khan, the PDPA (People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan), and the Taliban administrations provoked resistance and ultimately led to collapse. According to Barfield (2010: 338), Afghan rulers inspired by Abdur Rahman's centralized state-building idea, such as Amanullah Khan, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), and the Taliban, failed simply due to the attempts to enforce the centralized model rigidly, provoking widespread resistance and leading to ultimate state collapse.

Amir Abdur Rahman Khan, prioritizing internal consolidation over confrontation, successfully defined Afghanistan's external borders and administrative divisions, centralizing Afghanistan's state power, and asserting effective control beyond Kabul remained challenging. To consolidate authority over the country's diverse populations, the Amir established a network of state-sponsored sharia courts. These Islamic legal institutions were central to his broader campaign of centralization, framed as both administrative reform and a religious duty; thus, Islam served as both a unifying ideology and a tool to advance and legitimize state control (Ahmed, 2017: 57-58). Afghanistan's post-independence efforts to reclaim its imperial past were labeled irredentist, and attempts to reverse these borders were interpreted as a failure to reconcile with its colonial past (Drephal, 2019: 56).

6. "Pashtunistan": a Myth or Reality?

The Pashtuns are one of the world's largest tribal ethnic groups, mainly inhabiting the area between the Hindu Kush mountains in northeastern Afghanistan and the upper Indus River in Pakistan. Centered around cities like Kandahar and Peshawar, with large populations also in Karachi, Pashtuns have spread across South Asia and into a global diaspora; called by various names, Pashtun in Afghanistan, Pukhtun or Pathan in Pakistan, while the term Afghan, once used only for Pashtuns, eventually came to refer to all citizens of Afghanistan (Abbas, 2014: 11). Pashtuns are predominantly Sunni Muslims whose ethnolinguistic language is Pashto; in Afghanistan, Pashto and Dari are both officially recognized national languages. Unlike other Muslim states, Afghan political legitimacy historically drew on both Islamic authority and Pashtunwali, a tribal code of conduct, and jirga, a tribal council for collective decision-making. Thus, in Afghanistan, jirgas, particularly loya jirgas, played an important legitimizing role in key moments of state formation and came to symbolize claims of national consensus.

Since the mid-eighteenth century, Pashtuns have been the dominant ethnic group in Afghanistan, forming around forty percent of its population, with even more living across the border in Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province and Baluchistan. Historically, "Afghan" was synonymous with "Pashtun", making Afghanistan essentially the "land of the Pashtuns."; however, as the modern Afghan nation-state developed, the term "Afghan" acquired a broader national meaning, used internationally to describe all citizens of Afghanistan; despite as many non-Pashtun groups perceive "Afghan" as an indicator of Pashtun dominance and prefer alternatives like "Afghani" or "Afghanistani" believing that it reflects the country's multiethnic character (Barfield, 2010: 24). Afghan ethnicity is not monolithic, as demonstrated by the dominance of the Durrani Pashtuns in state power which originated from their key role in Nadir Shah's empire and the founding of the Afghan state by Ahmad Shah Durrani in 1747 (Sharma, 2017: 20-21). According to Sharma, Afghan ethnic groups are not static, isolated, or geographically bounded; however, they are historically fluid and interactive; thus, ethnic boundaries are socially constructed and maintained through interaction, not inherited as rigid categories.

Pashtun tribes are scattered across Afghanistan and Pakistan and near the borderland as non-homogeneous and unconquered communities by any external power; living in competition, conflict, and social and cultural differences throughout the centuries (Devasher, 2022: 15). Before the demarcation of the Durand Line, British colonial officials widely regarded Pashtun tribes as politically autonomous and beyond effective state authority, and debates over frontier policy reflected competing views on whether these communities should be isolated by the "close border" approach or gradually brought under British control and "civilized" through coercive and administrative means by the "forward policy" (Marsh, 2014: 19-21). The Durand Line institutionalized imperial control by dividing Pashtun communities while strategically integrating some into British India's defense system; Pashtuns on the Indian side benefited from British arms and financial support, positioning them as instruments of imperial policy against the Pashtuns on the Afghan side, rather than being considered as purely colonial subjects (Drephal, 2019: 51-52).

The Western portrayal of Pashtunistan as a hub of terrorism is criticized as reductive and unjust, ignoring the complex historical, ethnic, and political realities that shape the region. According to Leake (2017: 252-253), the U.S. and its western allies have historically failed to resolve the Durand Line dispute, avoiding opportunities since the 1950s to settle the border's legality and thereby perpetuating regional instability; coupled with the porous nature of the border, allowing militants to move freely while undermining state sovereignty. This unresolved border issue continues to fuel instability and the Afghan refusal to recognize the border, further complicating the situation. Apparently, labeling the issue of Pashtunistan merely as a terrorist haven unfairly simplifies a deeply rooted and nuanced issue.

Over recent decades, the salience of Pashtun ethnic nationalism articulated through the "Pashtunistan" idea has declined, giving way to predominantly integrationist, rights-based movements such as the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM), which frame their demands within the Pakistani state. The PTM emerged in 2014 as a non-violent, rights-based movement advocating peace, justice, and accountability in response to the long-standing marginalization and militarization of Pashtun regions in Pakistan, particularly in former FATA and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, while framing its demands, such as opposition to enforced disappearances and extrajudicial violence, within the Pakistani constitutional framework (Khan et al., 2025: 425-426). According to Khan et.al., the PTM emerged in response to the long-standing marginalization and systemic mistreatment of Pashtuns by Pakistan, highlighting human rights abuses, poverty, and underdevelopment. As a response, Pakistan has systematically pursued policies aimed at constraining Pashtun nationalist aspirations for an independent or unified "Pashtunistan," a stance that has shaped both its domestic approach toward Pashtun populations and its relations with Afghanistan, particularly in efforts to promote a favorable or compliant government in Kabul (Devasher, 2023: 27).

7. The Taliban's Approach to the Colonial-era Border

Since the formation of Afghanistan in the early eighteenth century, internal conflicts among Pashtun rulers often led to alliances with imperial powers, particularly the British, a dynamic that lasted until Afghanistan gained independence in 1919; even after independence indirect British influence and direct influences of the U.S. and the Soviet Union in the post-World War II period persisted, further shaping the country's political trajectory (Emadi, 2010: ix). Successive Afghan governments since 1947 have declined to formally recognize the Durand Line as an international border, framing the 1893 agreement as a colonial and unjust settlement, and thereby sustaining enduring geopolitical tensions with Pakistan rooted in the unresolved legacy of colonial boundary-making.

The Taliban, a Pashtun-dominated Islamic fundamentalist group, ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001 and returned to power following the withdrawal of the U.S. and NATO forces in 2021. Taliban's rise to power and their rule have been characterized by a combination of strict interpretations of Islamic law known as sharia, repression of human rights, particularly women's rights, and ongoing conflict with various domestic and international actors. In the 1990s, the Taliban sought to insulate Afghan society from perceived foreign cultural influences through strict social controls and an austere interpretation of Islamic law, rather than through effective enforcement of international borders; banning numerous everyday activities and goods, severely curtailing women's rights, and imposing rigid rules on men's appearance, creating a repressive society and sanctuary for extremist groups like Al-Qaida (Diener & Hagen, 2012: 106-107).

Afghan officials under the leadership of the Taliban have reiterated that the Durand Line has not been recognized by any Afghan government. Mohammad Nabi Omari, Deputy Minister of Interior of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, suggested that shifting conditions could enable Afghanistan to reclaim territories beyond the Durand Line, implying continued Taliban rejection of the border's permanence and legitimacy (Ariana News, 2025). Likewise, in the aftermath of recurrent Afghanistan-Pakistan border clashes, Afghan Defense Minister Yaqub Mujahid publicly reaffirmed the movement's long-standing refusal to recognize the Durand Line, describing it as an "imaginary border" (Amu Tv, 2025). The Taliban's historical stance reflects a broader Pashtun ethno-nationalist grievance, as the line is perceived as an artificial colonial imposition that fractures the socio-cultural unity of the Pashtun community.

Taliban's opposition to border fencing and fortification due to concerns over divided Pashtun tribes keeps the border dispute alive and fuels tensions with Pakistan. Meanwhile, the inhospitable, vast, and porous terrain allows limited control of movement, making undetected crossings easy and rendering strict border enforcement both impractical and unacceptable to local communities. Throughout the 2000s, the Afghanistan-Pakistan border conflict illustrated the complexity of the "War on Terror" discourse, where state forces, insurgents, and international coalitions intersect; as Al-Qaida and Taliban fighters evaded U.S.-led coalition and NATO forces in Afghanistan by retreating into Pakistan's semi-autonomous and Taliban-sympathetic tribal areas as a sanctuary (Diener & Hagen, 2012: 91). Al-Qaida and the Taliban had become deeply entrenched in the tribal areas, destroying cooperative tribal jirgas and cooperative moderates and paving the way for the formation of TTP in 2007, after which Pakistan's military and security services have remained in constant state of war, both against the TTP and in efforts to contain the Baloch insurgency (Johnson & Zellen, 2014: 175).

Pakistan initially viewed the Taliban's 2021 return to power in Kabul as a strategic win to counter India and reinforce its position on the Durand Line; however, Taliban opposition to Pakistan's border fencing efforts has reignited tensions, with rising cross-border violence involving the TTP and repeated border closures. Pakistan blames the Taliban for supporting the TTP, while the Taliban accuse Pakistan of suppressing Pashtuns and serving Western interests (Khan et.al., 2025: 424-428). The Taliban's return power has reshaped Afghanistan's political and security landscape, fueling militancy, economic decline, and a severe humanitarian crisis, and created major security challenges for Pakistan, particularly as the TTP and other insurgent groups, e.g., Islamic State Khorasan (ISIS-K) and Al-Qaida, operate from Afghan territory; in response, Pakistan has pursued a pragmatic strategy by combining counterterrorism efforts with ongoing engagement with the Taliban to avoid further destabilization (Popalzay, 2024: 1-26).

Afghanistan continues to face serious terrorist threats despite the Taliban's return to power in 2021. The ISIS-K remains the most active and lethal group, carrying out suicide bombings and attacks against civilians, religious sites, diplomatic targets, and Taliban officials, including the August 2021 Kabul airport bombing and subsequent attacks in Kabul in 2022 (CFR, 2025). According to a CFR analysis, United Nations and U.S. assessments indicate that ISIS-K is using Afghan territory to plan and coordinate regional and transnational attacks, retaining operational capacity and continuing to destabilize the country. At the same time, the presence of other militant networks, including Al-Qaida elements, underscores ongoing concerns that Afghanistan might again serve as a permissive environment for terrorist activity, posing risks to both regional and international security.

From a broader regional perspective, the Central Asian states tend to view Pashtun dominance and Taliban-style Islamism in Afghanistan as potential threats to their national interests, and Pakistan's strategic objective of securing trade and energy corridors through Afghanistan to Central Asia (Rashid, 2001: 211). Consequently, greater stability in Afghanistan is widely seen as yielding economic, political, and security benefits for neighboring and stakeholder states, including opportunities for Pakistan to benefit from Afghan reconstruction and development, address long-standing disputes, and enhance access to Central Asian trade routes.

Periodic skirmishes and tensions between Pakistani and Afghan security personnel along the disputed border greatly aggravate an already worsening bilateral relationship, with each side accusing the other of insincerity in fighting terrorism. Violent clashes near the Chaman border post in early May 2017 left at least 13 people dead and more than 80 wounded including security personnel and civilians, which erupted when Afghan Border Police allegedly opened fire on Pakistani soldiers escorting a census team, resulting in civilian and security casualties on both sides, with each country blaming the other for initiating the violence (RFE/RL News, 2017). More

recently, in October 2025, Afghan and Pakistani forces exchanged heavy fire in the most serious border clashes since the post-2021 Taliban regime, triggered by Pakistani airstrikes (Reuters, 2025). Reportedly, Afghan forces attacked Pakistani border posts, while Pakistan responded with artillery and gunfire, resulting in dozens of casualties, with Pakistan stating 23 soldiers killed and the Taliban reporting nine fatalities among its forces.

Since the Taliban's return to power, Islamabad has sought pragmatic engagement focused on border stabilization, counter-militancy, refugee management, and trade revival, yet unresolved border disputes and militant safe havens continue to strain relations (Hajira et.al., 2025: 273-282). Regional rivalries involving the United States, China, India, Iran, and Central Asia further shape Pakistan's policy calculus, positioning Afghanistan as central to regional security and connectivity initiatives such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). As Hajira et.al emphasizes, however, sustainable peace requires Pakistan to pursue a balanced strategy integrating security measures with diplomacy, regional cooperation, and development, alongside durable solutions for refugees and inclusive political engagement in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, as Popalzay (2024: 1-26) states, external powers, particularly China and Russia, have become more influential, complicating regional dynamics, while the U.S. withdrawal has further shifted regional alignments toward China, Russia, and Iran. According to Popalzay, Pakistan's primary challenge is the resurgence of the TTP, which has re-established operational bases in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan and expanded cooperation with militant groups such as ISIS-K and Al-Qaida. This has led to a rise in cross-border attacks, including suicide bombings, targeted killings, and raids in Pakistan's border regions, intensifying instability along the Afghanistan-Pakistan frontier. To Popalzay, Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts are further constrained by the Taliban's reluctance to dismantle the TTP, citing ideological affinity and non-interference, which has strained bilateral relations. Consequently, Pakistan has reinforced border security, surveillance, and fencing, highlighting the growing security dilemma created by militant sanctuaries in post-2021 Afghanistan.

The Durand Line continues to generate tension between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The border remains poorly defined, resulting in frequent skirmishes, military confrontations, and cross-border insurgency. Since the emergence of the Taliban and other militant groups, both states have accused each other of harboring insurgents. Pakistan has constructed a fence along segments of the Durand Line to limit militant infiltration, a measure Afghanistan opposes as an attempt to reinforce Pakistan's territorial claims. In recent years, Pakistan has intensified efforts to secure the border, asserting that fencing is necessary to control militant movement and illegal cross-border activities. Afghanistan, however, views this action as a violation of its sovereignty and an attempt to consolidate Pakistan's control over the disputed territory.

8. Challenges and Prospects

The status of the Durand Line remains highly contentious due to its historical origins, ethnic implications, and contested legal and political dimensions. The emergence of Pakistan as an independent state in 1947, inheriting the Durand Line as its border with Afghanistan, transformed the boundary into a protracted source of dispute. Pakistan recognizes the line on the basis of colonial-era agreements and principles of state succession, whereas Afghanistan has refused to accept it, arguing that the boundary fails to reflect local ethnic and cultural realities, particularly concerning the Pashtun population.

The Durand Line, as a legacy of British colonial bordering policies, has persisted as a problematic source of tension and instability between Afghanistan and Pakistan since the end of British rule in India. The British departure left Pakistan with a volatile stretch of territory known as the tribal agencies, located east of the Durand Line, further blurring the line between stable

governance and Afghan tribal unrest; as a result, Pakistan has long perceived security threats not only from India but also from tribal groups at its western frontier, leading policymakers to see control over Afghanistan as essential to its strategic defense against India (Kaplan, 2001: 329). Widely characterized as an “arbitrary” colonial boundary, the line largely disregarded pre-existing ethnic and tribal affiliations, generating enduring political, social, and security challenges. Established in 1893 and subsequently reaffirmed in the 1919 Rawalpindi Treaty and the 1921 Anglo-Afghan Treaty, the Durand Line was inherited by Pakistan in 1947 in accordance with the principle of state succession. Thus, the Durand Line divided the Pashtun tribal lands, creating a cleavage among people with a common culture and ethnicity; since then, this imperial geopolitical design has been a source of persistent conflict and dispute between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Khan et.al. (2025: 411-440), using the metaphor “Durand quagmire”, argue that the border's arbitrary nature has profoundly influenced regional stability, particularly impacting the Pashtun communities spanning Afghanistan and Pakistan. According to the authors, the resolution of the Durand Line dispute is constrained by three interrelated challenges. First, its colonial origin and the absence of meaningful local consultation have produced an enduring legacy of illegitimacy and contestation. Second, cross-border Pashtun tribal and cultural ties, rooted in the Pashtunwali code, resist rigid national boundaries and complicate efforts at formal border institutionalization. Third, the dispute is deeply embedded in regional and global geopolitical dynamics, as Afghanistan's strategic alignments and Pakistan's security concerns further intensify its complexity and hinder prospects for resolution.

The arbitrariness and disputed illegitimacy of the Durand Line have produced a border that has generated ongoing political tensions and security challenges, resulting in military conflicts and regional instability between Afghanistan and Pakistan (Khan et.al., 2025: 411-440). Militancy, criminality, funding through extortion, kidnapping, smuggling, abduction, and opium trade have all become increasingly intertwined across the Afghanistan-Pakistan border through militant groups and criminal networks (Peters, 2010: 1-8). The Durand Line has functioned as a primary corridor through which external powers have intervened in Afghanistan's internal affairs, facilitating the movement of fighters, finances, and military support, and contributing to the emergence and entrenchment of militant organizations such as the Taliban, Al-Qaida, and ISIS-K; and all these dynamics have intensified Pashtun nationalism and cross-border instability, rendering the Durand Line a persistent “Pandora's box” in regional politics and Afghanistan-Pakistan relations. (Suhrob, 2020: 1315-1318). Successive Afghan governments, particularly under Hamid Karzai (2002-2014) and Ashraf Ghani, accused Pakistan of pursuing a (2014-2021) alleged that Pakistan was pursuing a dual strategy by providing support to insurgent elements operating in Afghanistan; however, Pakistan claimed that the Afghan government had failed to take action against the leadership of TTP that orchestrated and directed terrorist attacks within Pakistan from territories under Afghan control (Hashimy, 2023: 104-105). Conversely, Pakistan has repeatedly accused Afghanistan of harboring the TTP and allowing cross-border attacks against Pakistani targets.

The Taliban do not formally endorse or publicly support the TTP's insurgency against Pakistan, while not regarding the TTP as an enemy organization, its leadership is repeatedly described as having relocated to and operated from Afghan territory, particularly after Pakistani military operations, indicating Taliban tolerance and non-confrontation rather than active opposition (Elahi, 2019: 212-214). The Taliban view the TTP as distinct but ideologically, culturally, and historically aligned; while not formally acknowledging the TTP as an ally, the Taliban are reluctant to act decisively against it due to the shared ideological roots, past cooperation during the insurgency years, and tribal-Pashtun linkages (Hussain, 2025). The Taliban, as Hussain states, categorically reject Pakistan's accusations that they provide sanctuary to the TTP, deny allegations of aligning and tolerating, warn Pakistan against “provocative”

statements, and instead shift responsibility back to Islamabad, urging Pakistan to improve its internal security and to share intelligence with Afghanistan so that “joint efforts” can be made. The Taliban, thus, by not taking decisive action to dismantle or expel the TTP, frames the issue as a cooperation and coordination problem, not one of Afghan complicity. This combination of inaction and denial allows the Taliban to distance themselves politically from TTP violence while continuing to permit its presence on Afghan soil.

The border symbolizes the challenges associated with nation-building, as well as the conflict-prone relationship between the two neighbouring countries; thus, Afghan governments repeatedly invoked the unresolved status of the Durand Line as part of their nation-building discourse, asserting a demand for "Greater Pashtunistan" that challenged Pakistan's territorial integrity until the 1970s (Wagner & Khan, 2013: 71-84). While in the 1990s, as the authors argue, the problematic border gained a regional dimension as the Pakistani military connected Afghanistan to its ongoing conflict with India over Kashmir. Eventually, following the 9/11 attacks, the Durand Line acquired a global dimension, becoming relevant within the context of the “War on Terror” discourse. More broadly, since the early 2000s, the notion of a “new Great Game” has been employed to describe contemporary geopolitical competition among the U.S. and its Western allies, Russia, and China over influence in Central Asia, particularly regarding energy resources; a competition, through direct or proxy involvement, is visible in countries like Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, and the Central Asian republics (Lintner, 2015: 1).

9. Conclusion

The motives behind the British imagination of the Durand Line were primarily strategic and imperial, shaped by the geopolitical pressures of the "Great Game" rivalry between the British and Russia for influence in Central Asia in the nineteenth century. The Durand Line was not merely a geographical demarcation; rather, it served British security interests in India, consolidated control over the tribal frontier, and established a "buffer zone" between British India and Russian expansion into Afghanistan. The border exists as an inherited colonial legacy that has contributed to long-lasting instability along the Afghanistan–Pakistan borderland. The most contentious aspect of the Durand Line lies in its geopolitical imagination, mostly shaped in accordance with the British imperial interests; primarily to manage geopolitical rivalries with Russia and to control the frontier tribes, effectively splitting communities and creating enduring tensions between the two nations.

Afghanistan’s modern geopolitical significance is rooted in a long history shaped by the colonial imposition of the Durand Line and its enduring legacies of insecurity and conflict, and the rise of the Taliban since the Soviet withdrawal, culminating in Afghanistan’s emergence as a central node of global security concerns following the 9/11 attacks and subsequent intervention of the U.S.-led coalition and NATO. The legacy of the British is still evident today, as many modern nation-states were formed by colonial-era boundaries, which often led to ongoing conflicts among competing groups over territorial control. The Afghanistan-Pakistan border, in this framework, is widely accepted as a historically constructed geopolitical artifact rooted in colonial power dynamics.

The Durand Line remains a source of tension between the neighbouring countries to this day. The poorly defined border, while demarcated in large sections on the ground between 1894 and 1896, has led to frequent border skirmishes, military confrontations, and cross-border insurgency. Since the rise of the Taliban and other militant groups, both countries have accused each other of harboring insurgents on either side of the border. Pakistan, over the last few decades, has also begun a border fencing process along parts of the Durand Line to control the movement of militants and illegal cross-border activity, while Afghanistan opposes this move as an attempt

to solidify its claim to the territory. Thus, Afghanistan–Pakistan relations are likely to remain shaped by conflicting national interests, border disputes, refugee crises, and strategic distrust. Despite occasional cooperation in commerce and counterterrorism, long-term stability remains elusive.

Contemporary international law typically upholds colonial-era boundaries under the principle of *uti possidetis juris*, the principle that new states inherit existing borders at independence, which limits Afghanistan’s ability to alter the status of the border. From an international law perspective, as affirmed by the International Court of Justice, the 1919 and 1921 treaties did not terminate the Durand Agreement, which remained legally valid despite lacking parliamentary ratification, as the Amir acted as Afghanistan’s sovereign. The agreement was reaffirmed in 1905 and later arrangements, reinforcing its status beyond a personal commitment. In the context of the Durand Line, Pakistan has invoked this principle to argue that the boundary, despite its colonial origins, is to be recognized as the legitimate international border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, particularly following Pakistan’s independence in 1947.

The prospect of an independent or autonomous "Pashtunistan" is politically and legally unlikely under the UN framework and prevailing international norms. Moreover, as Baldersheim & Rose (2010: 235) state, decisions about subnational territorial organization are inherently contentious, involving complex trade-offs in power sharing, jurisdiction, and resources, and can be further constrained by international treaties. State-building in Afghanistan is particularly challenging due to chronic deep ethnic divisions, underdevelopment, widespread poverty, and historical instability, as well as the past failures of the imposition of Western-style governance on societies with traditional tribal structures. In Pakistan, strong centralized authority and ethnic diversity in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan render autonomy politically sensitive.

Meanwhile, Afghanistan's non-recognition of the Durand Line as the international border, recurrent border tensions, cross-border militancy and insurgency, refugee crises, and strategic distrust have characterized Afghanistan-Pakistan relations despite their shared cultural, ethnic, and religious links. Even as both nations have occasionally expressed a desire to work together, particularly in areas such as commerce and counterterrorism, establishing long-term stability in their relationship is unlikely in the near future without resolving the ongoing dispute over the Durand Line and the "Pashtunistan" issue. As Devasher (2023: 27) states, a deep understanding of Pashtun society, including Pashtunwali, Pashtun nationalism, and Pashtun extremism, and the ways these forces interact, is essential for regional stability. Despite the border’s arbitrary nature for over a century, the two neighboring countries could resolve their disputes through effectively coordinated border management and the active use of joint mechanisms to foster confidence-building and de-escalate tensions. Superficial analyses have already produced harmful outcomes and could further exacerbate insecurity, refugee flows, drug trafficking, and the emergence of ungoverned spaces conducive to global terrorism. Amid an uncertain path ahead, both countries can pursue regional stability by adopting pragmatic strategies, fostering dialogue, and exploring cooperation through economic partnerships and multilateral diplomacy.

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