

MP-IDSA *Commentary*

Chaman–Spin Boldak Unrest: A Border Crisis Reignites

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S*ummary*

The Pakistan–Afghanistan border standoff threatens livelihoods as well as regional stability.

The Pakistan government announced a ban on cross-border travel with Afghanistan from November 2023. Residents of Chaman district in Pakistan protested against the government's decree immediately after it was announced, which made it compulsory for people passing the Spin Boldak–Chaman crossing to produce visas and passports.¹ So far, the Afghans and Pakistanis could cross the border at Spin Boldak showing their identity cards (Tazkira) alone. The Laghari (Labour) Union and the Laghari Traders Union have since been holding protests against the cross-border travel ban imposed by the Pakistan government.²

In June 2024, the Temporary Admission Document (TAD) was introduced as part of an agreement between Pakistan and Afghanistan aimed at improving border security and combating terrorism.³ Under this policy, Afghan truck drivers transporting commercial goods are required to provide necessary documentation such as vehicle registration, Identification cards, photographs, along with a US\$ 100 fee, to get entry into Pakistan. More than 40 protesters were arrested and at least 28 protesters including 17 security personnel were injured during the nine months protests.⁴ The authorities also shut down internet and communication services in the district for several days in order to disrupt the protests.

The restrictions imposed by the government have not only made it difficult for the people living across the border who had been routinely crossing it for years, they have also forced over 20,000 local workers out of job. Small businessmen and daily wage labourers working in Afghanistan are among those who have been severely affected due to the imposition of mandatory passport and visa. For the first time since the demarcation of the controversial border-line between Pakistan and Afghanistan over a century ago, such a ban was imposed on the movement of the local people. Pakistani officials have said that the restrictions are a necessary security measure as the country is grappling with a resurgence of cross-border militant violence since the Taliban seized power in Afghanistan in 2021.⁵

¹ Zia ur-Rehman and Christina Goldbaum, **“When Pakistan Tightened a Border, Thousands of Lives were Upended”**, *The New York Times*, 23 July 2024.

² Imtiaz Baloch, **“Pakistan’s New Visa Regime with Afghanistan Sparks Protests in Badakhshan”**, *The Khorasan Diary*, 11 June 2024.

³ **“Afghanistan, Pakistan: Ongoing Protests near Chaman and Torkham border Crossings...”**, *Crisis 24*, 16 August 2024.

⁴ Imtiaz Baloch, **“Pakistan’s New Visa Regime with Afghanistan Sparks. Protests in Badakhshan”**, *The Khorasan Diary*, 11 June 2024.

⁵ Ataullah Omar, **“Travellers Say Movement Still Restricted at Spin Boldak-Chaman Crossing”**, *Tolo News*, 22 July 2024.

People Divided by the Border

After the fall of the Durrani dynasty in the 18th century, the Pashtun Empire disintegrated. The British wanted to gain control of the region in order to guard against Russian expansion into Kabul. As a result, three Anglo-Afghan wars were fought (1828–42, 1879–80 and 1919) between the British Empire and various Afghan Emirs. After the second war in 1893, while negotiating with the British Foreign Secretary Mortimer Durand, Emir Abdur Rahman Khan agreed to the drawing of a border between British India and Afghanistan.⁶ The final boundary was drawn in 1897. This line created a cleavage amongst the people who shared the same culture and ethnicity. The agreement not only aimed to protect against a Russian attack but also gave Britain access to key trade routes.⁷ The British regarded the agreement as defining their spheres of influence rather than marking a clear boundary of sovereignty.

The *Khudai Khidmatgar* or ‘the Servants of God’ movement, led by Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, also known as the Frontier Gandhi, was the first significant political movement in the 20th century to challenge the border.⁸ After Pakistan’s formation in 1947, there was no formal agreement or ratification of treaties regarding the Durand Line. Afghanistan, in fact, rejected various treaties signed with the British during a *Loya Jirga* (Leadership Council) held in July 1949. These included the Treaty of Gandamak of 1879, the Durand Line Agreement of 1893, the Anglo-Afghan Pact of 1905, the Treaty of Rawalpindi of 1919, and the Anglo-Afghan Treaty of 1921.⁹ No Afghan government since 1949 has accepted the 2,640 kms Durand Line and these treaties. Many Pashtuns still hold on to their tribal ways of living, exhorting ‘Pashtunwali’ more than the state-sponsored ideology that is forced on them.

While the line has been disputed by Afghans who never have accepted it as an international border between the two countries, Pakistan views it as a permanent international boundary. The border officially has 18 crossing points, but Torkham and Chaman are the most commonly used crossing points for trade and movement of local people.

⁶ Kriti M. Shah, “[The Baloch and Pashtun nationalist movements in Pakistan: Colonial legacy and the failure of state policy](#)”, Occasional Paper, Observer Research Foundation, 30 July 2019.

⁷ “[Afghanistan-Pakistan Relations and the Durand Line: Why Is It Important?](#)”, Young Voices, Observer Research Foundation, 31 January 2022.

⁸ Praveen Swami, “[Colonial Legacy Divided Pashtunistan: Chaman Protest Shows Pashtun Nationalism Still Alive](#)”, *The Print*, 18 April 2024.

⁹ Riya Sinha, “[Decoding the Pashtuns in the Afghanistan-Pakistan Region](#)”, Centre for Social and Economic Progress, 23 November 2022.

Early restrictions on crossing the border were put by Pakistani officials when the United States (US) military invaded Afghanistan in 2001. American forces were concerned about the movements of Taliban fighters towards safe areas in Pakistan. Two years later, in 2003, the Pakistani authorities built the so-called Friendship Gate in Chaman along the main highway connecting Chaman in Balochistan to Spin Boldak in the Kandahar province of Afghanistan.

Terror Attacks in Pakistan

Meanwhile, terror attacks increased in Pakistan. Linking the attacks to Afghanistan, Islamabad decided to fence the border to curb movement of these terrorists inside the country. In 2017, Pakistan started to construct a larger border fence of 1,600 miles long, limiting movement through the dozens of informal crossings along the border. Since the border is disputed, the fencing also led to several clashes between the border security forces of the two countries. Locals who share culture and livelihood also started protests against the restrictions imposed on their otherwise natural movement.

Since the return of the Afghan Taliban to power in Afghanistan, terror attacks in Pakistan have increased. Pakistan authorities have held the Afghanistan government responsible for the attacks in their country citing their lenient stance towards terrorist groups like Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Despite all its efforts and requests to the Afghan Taliban, the latter has not so far acted against the TTP. Finally, the government of Pakistan took measures to stop what it called movement of terrorists from Afghanistan to Pakistan. Increasing security on the border between the two countries was one of the priority measures. While carrying out these measures though, the local dynamic was entirely overlooked, such as the sharing of culture, families and livelihood of the local people.

In solidarity with the protesters, local political parties, including Awami National Party (ANP), Pakhtunkhwa National Awami Party (PkMAP), Pishin Tahaffuz Movement (PTM) and National Democratic Party (NDP), organised a joint demonstration in front of the Quetta Press Club.¹⁰ Meanwhile, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) leader Asad Qaisar, while speaking in the National Assembly, demanded the formation of a parliamentary committee to address and resolve the dispute.¹¹ Mahmood Khan Achakzai, the head of PkMAP while condemning attacks on

¹⁰ Saleem Shahid, “[20 More Injured, 45 Held as Chaman Remains Restive](#)”, *Dawn*, 8 June 2024.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

protesters by the Pakistani forces, has accused the Pakistan government of suppressing the Pashtuns in the country.¹² However, Pakistani officials have not listened to these demands and reiterated their stance on implementing the order on security purposes. Khawaja Muhammad Asif, Pakistan's Minister of Defence, while backing the ban, emphasised the need for strict enforcement of international laws along Pakistan's border with Afghanistan.¹³

The Taliban have reaffirmed their position, asserting that the fencing constructed by Pakistan has divided families. The Acting Afghan Minister of Borders and Tribal Affairs Noorullah Noori termed the Durand Line as an “imaginary one” and said that it does not represent the official border between both nations. During his address to the media while on a visit to the Torkham border crossing in January 2024, Noori denied having any formal borders with Pakistan.¹⁴ Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai, the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Taliban, stated that the condition of visa and passport cannot be implemented and warned Pakistan to face the 1971 war crisis again if it continues to divide the community by imposing any official orders.¹⁵

Conclusion

The unrest at the Spin Boldak–Chaman crossing underscores the deep-seated complexities of the Afghanistan–Pakistan border. Pakistan's recent enforcement of passport and visa requirements marks a significant departure from over a century of relatively open cross-border movement that has severely impacted the livelihoods of thousands of local residents. The Taliban's stance of not recognising the Durand Line as an official border, along with their strong opposition to Pakistan's strict border policies, indicates that the dispute is unlikely to be resolved anytime soon. As both nations grapple with internal and external challenges, the future of this contested border remains uncertain.

¹² **“Achakzai: Pakistani Government Intends to Suppress Pashtuns”**, TV Network, *Tolo News*, 21 June 2024.

¹³ **“Pakistan's Defence Minister Supports Ban on Passport and Visa-Free Travel at Afghan Border”**, *Khamma Press Agency*, 28 June 2024.

¹⁴ **“Taliban Terms Durand Line Illegitimate; Calls it Imaginary”**, *The Pamphlet*, 29 January 2024.

¹⁵ **“Taliban Threatens Pakistan with Repeat of 1971; Rejects Durand line as Official Border”**, *The Pamphlet*, 19 February 2024.

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