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Pakistan Clerics' Delegation To Visit Afghanistan To Talk On Border Clashes



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Pak clerics' delegation to visit Afghanistan to talk on border clashes: Report

<https://www.wionews.com/world/pak-clerics-delegation-to-visit-afghanistan-to-talk-on-border-clashes-report-544292>

A four-member delegation of Pakistani clerics will visit Afghanistan this week to hold talks to end the cross-border clashes in the Chaman border region. The Chaman district administration said the delegation of the Pakistani Ulema will hold meetings with officials from Afghanistan's defence ministry and key Taliban leaders in Kandahar and Kabul, according to a report by The News International on Sunday.

The administration added that the Pakistan-Afghanistan border security forces' flag meeting has been postponed upon the departure of the Ulema delegation. However, routine operations in civilian areas were restored on both sides of the border, the report added. "All the guests of the hotel where the blast occurred on..... have been rescued and no foreigner was killed. Only two foreign guests were injured when they threw themselves from an upper storey," chief Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid added on Twitter. The news of the upcoming dialogue this week comes two days after Pakistan summoned a senior Afghan diplomat over the repeated cross-border clashes. "Afghan Chargé d'Affaires in Islamabad was called into the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Pakistan's strong condemnation over recent incidents of unprovoked cross-border shelling by Afghan Border Security Forces in the Chaman-Spin Boldak area, resulting in loss of life, injuries and damage to property, was conveyed," Pakistan's foreign ministry said in a statement on Friday.

"It was reiterated that protection of civilians remained the responsibility of both sides and that recurrence of these incidents must be prevented," the ministry said.

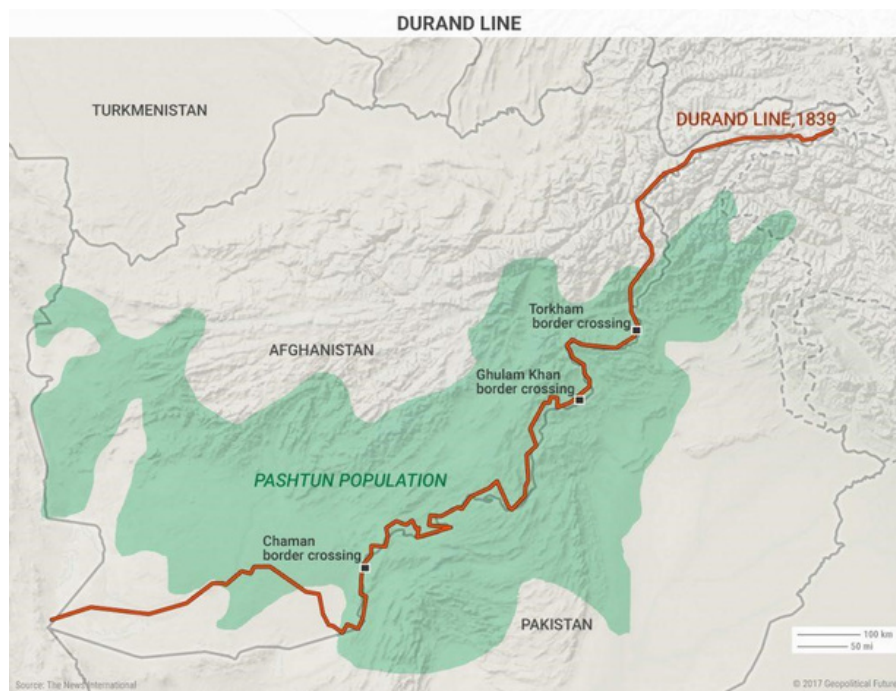
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Since August 2021, the border skirmishes between Pakistan and Taliban-led Afghanistan have increased significantly. The recent border clashes between the two countries that occurred earlier this month have elevated to the use of heavy artillery between Pakistani army and Taliban fighters along the Spin-Boldak-Chaman border. This is a major fallout for Pakistan's "strategic depth policy" which has become 'strategic menace' for some within Islamabad military circles.

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There is no doubt that Pakistan continues to re-calibrate its “Strategic Depth Policy” towards Afghanistan through diplomatic visits and exchange of religious clerics with an intent to retain strategic-edge over India. This is evident from the visit of the then-Pakistan Intelligence Chief to Kabul, immediately after the fall of democratically elected government with an intent to demonstrate Pakistan’s footprint during Taliban’s takeover. Pakistan’s relentless support to Taliban with arms, ammunition and safe havens during their 20-year insurgency against the West and the Afghan government, have come to a point where its policy seems to appeal only a certain section of Taliban and completely alienates Afghans in the context of boundary/border crossings.



Source: *The Independent*

Tensions along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border

While Islamabad made efforts to prevent any further rift, a key border crossing at Spin Boldak-Chaman was hurriedly closed after a cross-border gunfire on..... that resulted in one Pakistani ranger killed in a addition to loss of dozen civilian lives and one Taliban fighter. This triggered Islamabad to dispatch its minister of state for foreign affairs on an official visit to the Kabul pointing towards Pakistan’s diminishing influence over Taliban. From the firefight it is clear that Taliban is not ready to accept the Durand Line and will continue to challenge Islamabad and deny any interference in its ethnic solidarity and territorial sovereignty.

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Underlying tensions

Until recently, Islamabad continued to downplay these border skirmishes, calling for a diplomatic engagement and bi-lateral discussion in an effort to identify peaceful solutions, but the growing unrest in Pakistan's Pashtun is too big to be side-lined and too volatile to be ignored. Though misunderstood for a pro-Islamabad regime in Kabul, the underlying issue of border crossings and on the Durand Line as a whole is one of the points of discontent among Taliban leadership. Kabul's refusal to accept the Durand Line as the international border between Pakistan and Afghanistan, is one of the key points which had triggered recent clashes between their security forces, and remains a key driver of tensions, fuelling distrust.

The Taliban's victory is an inspiration for those who wish to impose sharia law in Pakistan. This is a cause of concern for Islamabad which not only struggles to contain violence induced by Tehrek-e-Taliban Pakistan but also a non-cooperative Afghan Taliban across the Durand Line. Some within the Pakistani military fear a blowback of their continued support to jihadist forces (Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) Sipah-e-Sahaba, Jaish ul-Adl and Al Badr Mujahideen, to name a few) as their hard-line ideology could stir religious fervour among a large section of its own population, which paves the way for greater Islamist radicalization within Pakistan society. On that note, some Islamist factions have been vocal against Pakistani government in the context of the nation's diminishing Islamic character.

A shift in relationship

Pakistan's unpopularity within the local Afghans, has made Taliban cautious to make any further bi-lateral engagements/discussions. This was evident post-Afghanistan's loss in the Asia Cup 2022, which exposed Pakistanis sentiments towards Afghans, which started with disappointed Afghans throwing plastic chairs at their Pakistani counterparts, followed by a long-heated debate on social media. Pakistani supporters termed Afghans as namak haram ("traitor"), pointing towards the thankless attitude of Afghans living as refugees in Pakistan for over decades, while Afghans countered by terming Pakistanis as 'terrorists'.

Taking the Pashtun sentiments into account, Pashtun nationalism is a matter of great pride for Taliban both within and across the Pakistan's border. This sentiment is the driving force that is often ignored or given lesser emphasis in the context of Taliban's ideology or ethnicity. Though Islamabad has never shied from using this as a major

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tool of propaganda in the past, its shifting relationship with Kabul makes this factor a chronic headache. The Taliban may use this as a leverage and force Islamabad to make negotiations/agreements suiting the former than the latter.

Complex relations: Islamabad and Kabul

Though some members of the Pakistani military may disavow the entire notion of “strategic depth” – Taliban leadership treads very carefully when it comes to Islamabad’s expectations of Afghanistan. Pakistani civil and military leadership, on many counts have assured Taliban leadership of their non-intervention in state matters particularly governance and ethnic minorities. On the contrary, military officials in Islamabad referring to Taliban as ‘an entity which is no longer serving its purpose and continues to fail in generating the impact that Pakistan desires’, seems to reflect otherwise. Taliban has deemed this relationship which was once that of a client state, threatening to its national sovereignty and territorial integrity, which means business is not going to be as usual.

Irrespective of how one may perceive this bi-lateral relationship, in spite of numerous points of disengagement, both sides acknowledge the growing rift and deterioration in their relations. Though from the recent Foreign Minister Bhutto’s statement it is clear that Pakistan does not want to be the sole country to provide diplomatic partner status to the Taliban and defy international community – Islamabad, is looking to provide political independence to Taliban. This is because of numerous initiatives, one such being the transcontinental trade network with Central Asian republics, cannot be fulfilled without Taliban’s support. Taking a look at the other side, Zabiullah Mujahid expressed “sorrow” over the cross-border firing incident while assuring Islamabad on the non-existence of terror groups operating in Afghanistan. However, the issue regains importance after a suicide bombing in southwestern Pakistan, for which Islamabad pinned the responsibility on Tehreek-e-Taliban-e-Pakistan (TTP) whose fighters allegedly crossed the border from Afghanistan.

India’s stance

Taking the elevated levels of hostility between Afghanistan and Pakistan and taking note of the latter’s relentless interference in India’s national security policies, it is important to resonate India’s stance over the issue of Durand Line on an appropriate occasion. This is also because India has so far refrained from taking any official

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position nor making a statement/observation on the issue.

If New Delhi decides to make an observation on Durand Line as a legal frontier between Afghanistan and Pakistan, it would benefit New Delhi in two ways:

- With the Taliban expressing interest to engage with New Delhi on multiple occasions, it is a welcome opportunity for New Delhi to reciprocate with reconstruction opportunities keeping the interest of local Afghans. This would elevate India to a regional strategic partner, the only responsible sovereign partner in the region.
- It would provide a unique opportunity to keep a close check on Pakistan's activities from the Afghanistan–Pakistan border.

There does not appear to be any downside to this initiative. Pakistan may term this step as India's interference in its internal policy and may raise the matter to international corridors to gather support. Also, there may be some who may object to India's stance towards Durand Line on a similar notion with India's stance on McMahon Line. Also, as per the Agreement, Pakistan must adhere to non-interference in Afghanistan (which remains unobserved till date) and was formally rejected by Afghanistan in accordance to the provisions mentioned in the 1921 agreement.

Conclusion

Pakistan continues to struggle on establishing positive engagements with Taliban, whereas its policies to support terror factions have resulted in Islamist radicalism at home which continues to threaten its society. Islamabad is not in a position to make any agreements with Kabul, even under the current Taliban leadership, as long as it continues to influence the latter's policy decisions. As long as Pakistan retains duality in its policy— a revisionist state in terms of Kashmir and principal patron of Taliban with considerable leverage— the road is longer and steep for Islamabad.

In the later months following the fall of Kabul, there was widespread celebration in Pakistan. The security institutions and hard liner members of the Pakistan society were particularly pleased to witness Western forces packing up in haste from Afghanistan. But recent incidents unveil an uncertain trajectory for the future of Pakistan–Afghanistan relations.