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## Issue Brief

# Pakistan-Afghanistan Tensions at Chaman

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**Relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan have been following a downward trajectory since 2015. They have reached their lowest following a number of clashes along the Pak-Afghan border which has not only led to the closure of the border in the past but also fatalities on both sides as well.**

However, the latest incident in which the Afghan forces opened fire on a Pakistani census team accompanied by the Frontier Corps (FC) on May 5 has taken relations to an all time low. As a result of indiscriminate firing from the Afghan side, 10 people including women, children and an FC personnel were killed, while 47 others sustained injuries in the Killi Luqman and Killi Jahangir villages close to the Chaman border crossing in Balochistan. In response, Pakistan targeted Afghan check-posts, and killed 50 Afghan National Army personnel and injured 100.<sup>1</sup>

The area (comprising of the Killi Luqman and Killi Jahangir villages) where the incident took place is contested by Kabul, which claims the villages are a part of its Spin Boldak district. However, Pakistan categorically dismisses the assertion.

The Afghan stance is shrouded in ambiguity and contradictions. Even if one follows the Afghan version of events that Pakistani forces “crossed the Durand Line into Afghan villages in Spin Boldak area for carrying out a



survey,”<sup>2</sup> Afghan authorities' action and indiscriminate use of fire against a census team comprising largely of civilians cannot be justified. Kabul could have used other non-military measures to handle the situation. The fact that Kabul acknowledged the presence of the census team clearly indicates that it was not a security breach. Nor was it a violation of Afghan sovereignty and territorial integrity, as Kabul claims. On the one hand, they say that Pakistan violated the territorial integrity of Afghanistan, on the other they waged an attack on people living in that area - hence should one assume that they attacked their own territory and people?

Compared to past such incidences, the May 5 incident is the first and bloodiest of its kind where Afghanistan has targeted Pakistan's civilian population. As a result, hopes of resetting ties remain slim as tensions and emotions are high on both sides of the border.

Traditionally, Pakistan's relations with Afghanistan have been strained and uneasy at best, however, they have had a few brief moments of stability also. During former President Hamid Karazi's protracted tenure, relations were strained as the gaps in mistrust and continuous blame game grew. After President Ghani's government of national unity took over in 2014, Pak-Afghan relations witnessed a marked improvement – where political, military and intelligence ties drastically grew. However, despite a visible improvement in ties, these were short lived. Both countries once again found themselves entangled in a vicious blame game of antagonism and mistrust. These were primarily due to unfulfilled expectations, counter-terrorism differences, peace process with the Afghan Taliban, reignited border disputes and the issue of Afghan refugees.

Since 2015, both countries have been in a perpetual state of escalating tensions. Several attempts have been made to improve ties, including the high-level Pak-Afghan advisers' meeting, brokered by the British government in March 2017. Though, both sides cited 'incremental progress' and agreed to take 'tangible' confidence building measures related to each other's concerns,<sup>3</sup> yet, relations have continued to deteriorate. More recently, Pakistan's Chief of General Staff (CGS) Lt. Gen. Bilal Akbar and Director General Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) Lt. Gen. Naveed Mukhtar travelled to Kabul in an attempt to diffuse tensions.<sup>4</sup> Prior to these visits, National Assembly Speaker, Sardar Ayaz Sadiq had led a parliamentary delegation to Kabul. President Ghani had assured Sardar Ayaz Sadiq of his visit to Islamabad. Pakistan's efforts, be it at the civil or military level to reset ties seem to be falling on deaf ears. President Ghani later declined the invitation,<sup>5</sup> stating that he would only visit Pakistan once the "perpetrators behind the attacks on Mazar-e-Sharif, Kabul and Kandahar, are handed over to Afghanistan."<sup>6</sup>

Despite Kabul's regular outbursts against Pakistan, Islamabad has demonstrated immense restraint and maturity and has extended all efforts to clearly restore relations, as well as revive the peace process with the Taliban. Nonetheless, Kabul has been less forthcoming.

Pakistan's role in the future stability of Afghanistan is vital. Ashraf Ghani too has acknowledged that "partnership with Pakistan is an important pillar of Afghanistan's foreign policy." But what Kabul needs to realize is that it is in its best interest that it finds a partner and friend in Pakistan instead of an

enemy. Chief Executive Abdullah has rightly pointed out that "Afghanistan has neither the capacity nor the intention to destabilise Pakistan."<sup>7</sup> Hence, it would be prudent for the Afghan leadership to mend fences with Pakistan instead of attempting to exert pressure or resorting to the use of indiscriminate firing. Despite tensions on the border emanating from Kabul's non compliance, Islamabad is determined to take steps to effectively secure its side of the border be it through surveillance, fencing or other similar measures.

Pakistan as a sovereign state has the right to defend its territory. Hence, Afghanistan needs to move beyond its hostility, and not let the border issues destroy its ties with Pakistan. It is important for Pakistan and Afghanistan to move forward and engage on a host of issues, and not limit their relationship to their joint border. The controversy surrounding the Pak-Afghan border and its mismanagement needs to be addressed and settled through diplomacy and with maturity instead of referring to Google Maps.<sup>8</sup>

#### Notes and References:

- <sup>1</sup> "Pakistani army kills 50 Afghan forces in border fight," *New York Post*, May 7, 2017, <http://nypost.com/2017/05/07/pakistani-army-kills-50-afghan-forces-in-border-fight/>
- <sup>2</sup> "Zero tolerance for border violations, warns Sartaj," *Express Tribune*, May 10, 2017
- <sup>3</sup> Baqir Sajjad Syed & Own Bennett Jones, 'Incremental progress' in Pak-Afghan talks," *Dawn*, March 17, 2017,
- <sup>4</sup> "DG ISI quietly visits Kabul to discuss intelligence-related issues," *Express Tribune*, May 3, 2017
- <sup>5</sup> "Afghan president Ashraf Ghani turns down invitation to visit Pakistan," *Express Tribune*, May 4, 2017
- <sup>6</sup> "Afghan president Ashraf Ghani turns down invitation to visit Pakistan," *Express Tribune*, May 4, 2017
- <sup>7</sup> Khalid Mehmood "No intention to destabilise Pakistan, says Abdullah," *Express Tribune*, May 9, 2017
- <sup>8</sup> "Google Maps to help settle Afghanistan-Pakistan border dispute," May 8 2017, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/08/google-maps-to-help-settle-afghanistan-pakistan-border-dispute>