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Issue Brief

Pakistan-Afghan Border: Need to End the Blame Game

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In an effort to ease tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan, the British government facilitated the 'first high-level interaction' between the two neighbours on March 15, 2017¹ since tensions escalated after a wave of



terrorist attacks hit Pakistan in February 2017, including the suicide attack on Lal Shahbaz Qalandar's shrine in Sehwan which left 80 people dead. As a result of the attacks, in order to secure its border, Pakistan deployed additional FC troops along its border with Afghanistan and also closed its border with Afghanistan at Torkham and Chaman.²

The meeting in London took place between Pakistan's Adviser on Foreign Affairs, Sartaj Aziz and Afghan National Security Adviser (NSA) Haneef Atmar and the British National Security Adviser, Mark Lyall Grant. During the Pak-Afghan advisers' meeting, issues related to border violations, closure of the border and exchange of the lists of wanted militants were discussed. Soon after the talks, both Pakistan and Afghanistan cited 'incremental progress' and agreed to take 'tangible' confidence building measures related to each other's concerns. In a post, Dr Omar Zakhilwal, Afghan ambassador to Pakistan, noted that the meeting was held, "to discuss and agree on a mechanism for genuine bilateral cooperation on fighting terrorism, agree on steps and measures to improve the current tense bilateral relations and mutual trust. We are positive that the implementation of the mechanism we agreed upon can inject the needed trust and confidence for constructive forward-looking state-to-state relations and cooperation."³

As a result of the talks, the Pak-Afghan border was reopened after 32 days on March 20, 2017 after Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif ordered the reopening of the border as a 'goodwill gesture' stating that "as

it was hurting the common man and affecting the trade activities" and hoped that the, "reasons for its closure would be addressed by the government of Afghanistan."⁴

The Pak-Afghan border continues to be amongst the most contentious bilateral issues between the two neighbours. In the recent past, relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan have reached their lowest following a number of clashes along the Pak-Afghan border which have led to fatalities on both sides. Islamabad has long been calling for border management and has made several attempts to explore workable options and address it through formal negotiations. However, Kabul has been less forthcoming and has opposed any initiatives proposed by Pakistan. Although, internationally, the Durand Line is accepted as a recognised border, all successive Afghan governments, including the Taliban and government of national unity have refused to accept the legality of the border maintaining that, "any activity along the border by either side must be approved by both countries."⁵

In 2006, in an effort to prevent illegal crossing of militants and also to put an end to the continuous accusations levelled against Pakistan by Kabul for abetting the Taliban attacks in Afghanistan, Pakistan decided to fence parts of the 2,430 km border. However, this initiative was met with strong opposition from the Afghan side, which noted that this would only lead to dividing and separating the ethnic tribes on both sides of the border. In another effort, Pakistani authorities installed a biometric system at the Chaman border crossing 'Bab-e-Dosti' (Friendship Gate) in Baluchistan, in January 2007. However, that too was opposed as angry protestors attacked the border gate and the system had to be done away with. Similarly, in May 2013, clashes erupted between Pak-Afghan forces when Pakistani forces tried to repair a gate at Pakistan's Gursal military post (near the Afghan district of Goshtain the Nangarhar province).⁶

Similarly in June 2016, Pakistan informed Afghan authorities about the installation of new border initiatives including the construction of a gate at the Torkham crossing, as well as the requirement of valid and legal travel documents (passport and visa) for all Afghans entering Pakistan. However, Afghan authorities expressed strong opposition and resorted to unprovoked firing along the border which resulted in the death of Major Jawad Ali Changezi, as well as an Afghan soldier. As a result of escalated tensions, the Pak-Afghan border in Chaman and Torkum was closed several times which affected the masses and trade on both sides of the border. Following clashes, both countries agreed to improve border security and coordination, and while tensions quelled at the border, these, however, were short lived. In January 2017, tensions across the Pak-Afghan border were witnessed with firing from across

Afghanistan on a Pakistani border post in the Khyber Agency in which a Pakistani soldier, Sepoy Waqas was killed.⁷ Since then, tensions have been high along the border due to cross border clashes which resulted in the closure of the border from February-March 20, 2017. Although the border was reopened and is functional, on April 1, 2017 the crossing at Chaman was briefly closed yet again for a few hours after three people were injured when Afghan protesters clashed with border officials during checking of travellers' documents at the crossing.⁸

Despite tensions on the border emanating from Kabul, Islamabad is determined to take steps to effectively secure its side of the border. It has, therefore, initiated phased fencing of its 2,430 kilometres border with Afghanistan in Fata (Bajaur and Mohmand) and KP.⁹ So far 1,300 kilometres of the border has been fenced and aerial surveillance and special radar systems have been installed.¹⁰ In addition to the Torkham check post in Khyber, four additional check points are to be constructed in FATA in South Waziristan, North Waziristan, Kurrum and Mohmand agencies to help facilitate legal entrants.¹¹ Kabul, on the other hand, has once again opposed the matter and has complained to the UN Security Council about Pakistan's 'violations' along the border, stating that Pakistan "cannot fence the border without Afghanistan's consent" and any unilateral action would be a 'violation' of international laws.¹²

However it is pertinent to highlight that Kabul's stance on the Pak-Afghan border is contradictory and shrouded in ambiguity: on the one hand, Kabul claims that the Durand Line divides families living on both sides of the border, yet, at the same time they continue to blame Pakistan of interference, supporting the Afghan Taliban and cross border terrorism.¹³ It is important to mention that whenever Pakistan has raised the issue of border recognition or initiated measures to manage or regulate its side of the border, there has been stern opposition from the Afghan leadership.

Despite the Afghan state's non acceptance of the Pak-Afghan border, the fact remains that the Durand Line is an internationally recognized border. Pakistan is a sovereign state which has the right to defend its territory as long as it does not encroach on Afghan territory. Therefore, it does not need a formal recognition of the border from the Afghan side nor Kabul's approval. Pakistan should continue to implement border initiatives on its side of the border regardless of the Afghan states' non-recognition or acceptance of the border. Reluctance on the part of the Afghan government to officially recognize or accept the border due to domestic constraints is understandable and must be kept in mind by Pakistan. After all, no matter how popular a government in Afghanistan, it would be political suicide for any Afghan leader to do so. This has been witnessed in the case of Abdul Latif Pedram, an Afghan

parliamentarian and head of the Hezb-e-Kongara Milli Afghanistan (National Congress Party of Afghanistan), who has urged the Afghan government to set aside its differences with Pakistan and accept the Durand Line as its border as it is already an 'internationally accepted border'.¹⁴

However, Pedram has faced immense criticism, as well as security threats for his remarks, with certain Afghan MPAs demanding that he should be stripped of his parliament membership and stoned.¹⁵ Pedram's comments follow those made by the Afghan Chief Executive, Dr Abdullah Abdullah who was quoted as saying that the Durand Line is no more an "imaginary line" but is an internationally recognised border. According to newspaper reports, Abdullah Abdullah made the remarks during a meeting with a visiting Pakistani delegation in Kabul headed by the Governor of Khyber Puktunkwa, Iqbal Zafar Jhagra and included Shahjee Gul Afridi a parliamentarian from FATA.¹⁶ Shahjee Gul Afridi stated that during his interaction with Afghanistan's Chief Executive, Dr Abdullah, acknowledged the Durand Line as an international border between Afghanistan and Pakistan.¹⁷ However, the remarks were denied by Abdullah's spokesman, Javid Faisal who termed them as "propaganda and psychological war."¹⁸

Borders define sovereign states, and Afghanistan, being a sovereign and independent state, should accept the defined border to uphold their sovereignty and prevent undue 'interference' from external elements. In this regard, the initiatives introduced by Pakistan on its side of the border should be welcomed and reciprocated by Afghanistan with the aim to transform this historically contentious border into a conduit for cooperation. Subsequently, this will also put an end to continuous blame game and limit the movement of militants across the border.

Notes and References:

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/Dr.Zakhilwal/>

² "Shoot-on-sight orders over illegal entry from Afghanistan", Dawn, February 20, 2017

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⁴ "Pakistan re-opens Afghan border after 32 days", *The News*, March 21, 2017

⁵ Hamid Shalizi and Mirwais Harooni, "Afghanistan warns Pakistan after border clash erupts again," Reuters, May 6, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-pakistan-idUSBRE94503J20130506>

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⁷ "Pakistan Army sepoy killed in Afghanistan crossfire," *Express Tribune*, January 30, 2017.

⁸ "Clash at Pak-Afghan border injures 3," *Pakistan Today*, April 2, 2017.

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¹⁰ "Pakistan begins fencing of Afghan border," *The Nation*, March 31, 2017

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- ¹⁸ "Afghan CE's office rejects claim of accepting Durand Line as border," *1tv News*, March 30, 2017, <http://1tvnews.af/en/news/afghanistan/28655-afghan-ces-office-rejects-claim-of-accepting-durand-line-as-border-with-pakistan>