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Torkham & Other Border Disputes: Understanding the AfPak Border

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INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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In a speech Sunday commemorating the 105th anniversary of Afghanistan's independence, the Taliban's defense minister, Yaqoob Mujahid, claimed,

provinces.

"Constructing roads, deploying border security forces, and establishing checkpoints along the Durand Line is not a challenge to our neighbors; it is a measure to protect Afghanistan. We will do this at any cost, no matter what." The statement seems aimed

security outposts in eastern Afghanistan in Kunar province. These outposts were built to add security and logistical support to Afghanistan's contentious border with Pakistan, a border that was subject both to a border skirmish and accusations of airspace violations this week. On Thursday morning, the Torkham border crossing, a major crossing between Pakistan and Afghanistan, was finally reopened after three Afghan civilians were killed earlier this week during a shootout between Pakistani and Taliban forces. On Tuesday, the Taliban announced it was investigating purported airspace violations by aircraft—possibly Pakistani JF-17s—near the border. These recent events are in turn fueled by Pakistan's daily deportations of Afghan migrants, for which it came under international scrutiny earlier in the year. Each of these recent phenomena is connected to a larger historical debate over the Afghan-Pakistani border, known as the Durand Line. The border seems to be destined for more conflict. As the Taliban grows in economic power and recognition, it will likely draw more attention to the plight of ethnic Pashtuns in Pakistan, and as Pakistan's security crisis worsens, Islamabad will pressure Kabul to further secure its border

at Pakistan; after all, it came two days after Mujahid's visit to recently-built border



the northwestern provinces), leading to locally criticized "military operations" to

root out said militants. The second narrative refers to more specific militant groups,

like the Tehreek-e-Taliban, who only cross into Pakistan to conduct attacks before

securing the border, Islamabad hopes to deter militant attacks and convince Beijing

But the deportations have been highly criticized by the international community.

day, a number that has become all too normal in the past few weeks as both

countries began deporting thousands of Afghans daily. Pakistan in particular,

than 850,000 had entered the country. Some of those people could merely be

has welcomed the returning migrants with open arms, as the group noted in

traveling to visit family, but the report released by the MRR suggests the majority of

Whether they actually can is uncertain. It's true that the Taliban leadership in Kabul

One week ago, 160 Afghan families were expelled from Iran and Pakistan in a single

already stressed by economic and security instability, has undertaken initiatives like

disappearing back over the border. By deporting undocumented migrants and

that the country is safe to invest in.

the incomers are hoping to stay.

the Resolve for Stability military operation announced earlier this summer to fight militant attacks. In response, intense opposition has arisen in Pakistan and globally. Although the intervention of the UNHCR and other international actors last month forced Islamabad to curb its deportation of documented migrants, the Islamabad-Kabul relationship is still affected and informed by Afghanistan's migrational patterns. Notably, the International Organization for Migration reported on July 19th that at least 500,000 people had left Afghanistan between April and June, whereas more

Sunday's commemorative speech, yet Afghanistan lacks the infrastructure to support these migrants, which has also been admitted by the Taliban. Since 2020, almost 8 million Afghans have left the country, a statistic disputed by the Taliban. Reportedly, 80 percent of these migrants make their way to neighboring countries, with the rest often dispersing to Europe.

Acting Minister of National Defense visits newly established post along the Durand Line in Dangam district of Kunar

land and divides ethnic Balochs and Pashtuns. But the 1,640-mile-long border is also porous; it has 234 recognized crossings, but plenty of mountainous sections are unsecured.

According to some members of the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM) in Pakistan,

The line indiscriminately cuts through villages or separates them from agricultural

The Taliban does not recognize the Durand Line, a long-disputed boundary created

by the Emirate of Afghanistan and the British Indian Empire in 1893. Afghan leaders

have historically not recognized the border, and the Taliban continues that tradition.

the Pakistani government, especially the Pakistani military complex, represses Pakistani Pashtuns. The PTM has accused the Pakistani government of conducting targeted attacks against its members and strongly opposes the Resolve for Stability

tried to build a new checkpoint in Torkham.

probably justified in distrusting Islamabad.

Afghanistan on August 13th (AP Photo/Shafiullah Kakar)

The Durand Line's Future

province on August 16th (Via X / IEA Ministry of Defense)

Militancy & The AfPak Border

military initiative aimed at combating attacks. Pakistan's official stance on the Durand Line, meanwhile, is that the border was set by international law. While that may be true, the boundary cuts through a very tangible ethnic environment. Pashtuns, generally speaking, have a strong cultural identity, defined moral codes, and place value on independence. As the European Foundation for South Asian Studies notes, the final doctrine of the Pashtunwali actually obligates Pashtuns to defend their land.

Additionally, the line itself seems to be, like perhaps most boundaries, blithely

Islamabad has long been working to fortify the border, and Afghan media has

drawn--it cuts villages in half and plainly divides a people. In some ways, though,

that division is irrelevant due to the porous nature of the Afghan-Pakistani border.

accused the most recent skirmish this past week of sparking after Pakistani forces

But the expansive border is, to some extent, incapable of being fortified because of

rugged terrain, enabling the aforementioned TTP to easily pass into areas like South Waziristan. Yet Islamabad is not the only government that lacks control of the border; on the Afghanistan side, reportedly, the threat of Islamic State-Khorasan Province and Al-Qaeda activity persists, which can also take advantage of the weak border. Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) famously supported the Taliban toward the start of the 21st century on a gamble that the Taliban would curb Pashtun nationalism and support. Unfortunately for them, the Taliban has now done the opposite, and any remaining anti-Taliban Pashtun tribes in Pakistan are

Afghan residents stand near a wall damaged by the skirmish near the Torkham border of Nangarhar province in

The most recent border skirmish between Afghanistan and Pakistan, with a reported

previous engagements. But the world should expect skirmishes to continue. A lack of

casualty count of three, is a relatively small fight when taken in the context of

cooperation between Afghan and Pakistani intelligence and security sectors, the

persistence of outdated judicial and territorial laws leftover from British colonial

rule, the Pakistani military complex's historically aggressive tactics, and the

conflict for the area. Calls from the international community to review the

vulnerability of the poverty-stricken Pashtun heartland to militancy forebode

seemingly obsolete Durand Line have been renewed. International law certainly

compels Islamabad, but redrawing the border would also require immense and costly

effort and cooperation between two governments that, despite their diplomatic lines

And although Kabul decries the Durand Line for dividing ethnic Pashtuns, it has not offered any reasonable propositions of what a new border line would entail. Afghanistan has never officially recognized the Durand Line, but they have acknowledged the line as a border between British India and Afghanistan in the past.

colonial authorities, then why should Kabul continue referring to it as "the

As critics have pointed out, if Pakistan has simply assumed the rule of the British

of communication, slowly yet surely aggravate each other.

imaginary line?" The Taliban can criticize the border for its separation of villages, but the border has also been shaped by Afghanistan's ceding territory. Arguing that Peshawar has always historically been Afghanistan's territory is challenging because of Afghanistan's ethnic history. Regardless, the question remains: if the ethnically Pashtun regions should belong to the Pashtuns, then what role does Afghanistan play in their independence? Moreover, this article has only investigated the Pashtun populations without mentioning Baloch populations that also settled along Pakistan's border with Afghanistan. Balochistan, along Pakistan's southern border with Afghanistan, is a region with insurgent activity of its own. Yet the ambitions of Baluch peoples are not the same as those of Pashtuns, and a redrawn border would need to consider both ethnicities' needs.

Afghan nationals wait to cross the border into Afghanistan from Pakistan at the Torkham border post in Pakistan's Khyber Agency (By RFE/RL)

Ultimately, the spark for conflict would be militant activity near the border,

specifically that of the TTP. Thus far, Pakistan's Resolve for Stability initiative has

not involved any cross-border operations. Kabul perhaps anticipates, nonetheless,

that if the initiative fails to bolster regional stability, such operations targeting

The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan

militants *across* the border are more likely, which is why Kabul hastens to construct more outposts. This weekend, Mujahid offered to mediate talks between Pakistan and the TTP, although previous talks have been unsuccessful. In addition, the Pakistan Army's characteristically aggressive tactics against local Baloch and Pashtun populations likely will further inflame tensions. On the other hand, Islamabad's concerns over militancy go beyond a simple need to appease Beijing investors and the Chinese government. Although Afghan-led mediation between the TTP and Pakistani leadership is possible, it's unclear what resolution could be reached. The TTP does present a security threat to Pakistan, and

the United Nations has previously supported Pakistan's allegations that the TTP seeks refuge in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, the Taliban persistently denies this, carefully protecting the narrative that Kabul controls Afghanistan and that other terrorist threats are minuscule. Recently, online accounts and channels supporting the TTP circulated a map depicting the Taliban's control of Afghanistan and the TTP's control of Pakistan, while an illustrated Taliban fighter moves toward Iran and TTP militants move toward India. A nasheed in the background sings, "Our Jihad caravans are moving toward their destination..." Analysis

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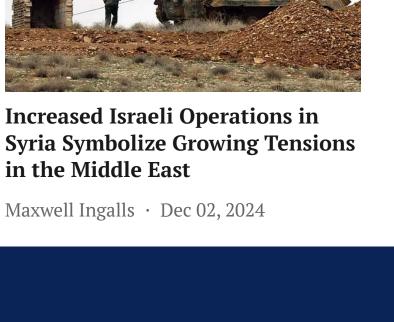
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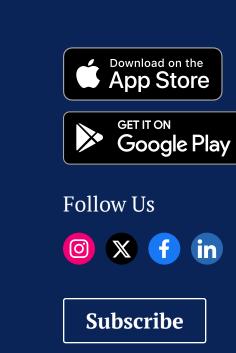


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