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**The Complex Web of Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations: A Historical Analysis**

**Historical Background: The Durand Line Controversy**

The origins of the troubled relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan can be traced back to November 12, 1893, when British diplomat Sir Mortimer Durand negotiated a 2,640-kilometer boundary with Afghan Amir Abdur Rahman Khan. This border, which came to be known as the Durand Line, was intended to create a buffer zone between British India and the Russian Empire during the "Great Game" period. However, this arbitrary demarcation cut through the traditional lands of the Pashtun tribes, dividing families and communities that had existed as a cohesive ethnic group for centuries.

According to Dr. Ijaz Khan's influential article "Challenges to the Afghan-Pakistan Border" (2007, Journal of South Asian Studies), the Durand Line represents "perhaps the most significant colonial legacy affecting regional stability in South Asia." Khan argues that the border's creation was "less a product of geographical reality than of imperial convenience," which explains its enduring controversy.

When Pakistan gained independence on August 14, 1947, it inherited this contentious border. Afghanistan was the sole country to vote against Pakistan's admission to the United Nations in 1947, citing grievances over the Durand Line. King Zahir Shah's government in Kabul refused to recognize this colonial-era boundary as the international border, claiming that the agreement with the British had expired with their departure from the subcontinent.

Dr. Barnett Rubin's seminal work "The Fragmentation of Afghanistan" (Yale University Press, 2002) notes that Afghanistan's rejection of the Durand Line stemmed from "the fundamental belief that the Pashtun territories had been unfairly separated from the Afghan homeland." This position, Rubin argues, formed "the cornerstone of Afghan foreign policy towards Pakistan for decades to come."

The first serious diplomatic crisis erupted in 1955 when Pakistani Prime Minister Mohammad Ali Bogra announced the merger of all western provinces into "One Unit" as part of West Pakistan. Afghanistan responded by displaying the flag of "Pashtunistan" at official events, promoting the idea of a separate homeland for Pashtuns that would encompass parts of Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province (now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa). Diplomatic relations were severed, and border skirmishes occurred along the Khyber Pass in September 1955, resulting in dozens of casualties.

Professor Abubakar Siddique's article "The Pashtun Question and Pakistan's Enduring Challenges" (Middle East Institute, 2019) describes this period as "the formative phase of a bitter relationship," noting that "the seeds of future proxy conflicts were sown in these early border disputes."

Between 1961 and 1963, diplomatic ties were again broken when Afghanistan's King Zahir Shah aligned more closely with the Soviet Union, while Pakistan strengthened its alliance with the United States. The border dispute remained unresolved, creating a foundational mistrust that would color all future interactions between the neighboring states.

By 1973, when Sardar Mohammed Daoud Khan overthrew King Zahir Shah in a coup, tensions escalated further. Daoud, a Pashtun nationalist, intensified support for Pashtun separatists in Pakistan, providing training camps and financial assistance to insurgent groups. Pakistan's Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto responded by providing sanctuary to Afghan Islamist leaders like Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Burhanuddin Rabbani, who opposed Daoud's secular nationalism. This marked the beginning of a pattern of proxy warfare that would define Pakistan-Afghanistan relations for decades to come.

Dr. Hassan Abbas, in his article "Pakistan's Frontier Corps and the War Against Terrorism" (Jamestown Foundation, 2007), observes that this period represented "the first significant use of religious militants as strategic assets," a policy that would have "profound and unforeseen consequences for regional security."

**The Soviet-Afghan War and Its Aftermath (1979-1989)**

The geopolitical landscape changed dramatically on December 24, 1979, when the Soviet Union launched a full-scale military intervention in Afghanistan. Operation Storm-333 saw 700 Soviet troops seize key installations in Kabul, while approximately 80,000 soldiers crossed the border. The Soviets assassinated President Hafizullah Amin and installed Babrak Karmal as the new leader, transforming Afghanistan into a Cold War battleground almost overnight.

In his comprehensive study "Ghost Wars" (Penguin Press, 2004), Steve Coll details how this invasion "fundamentally altered the security calculus for Pakistan," creating both unprecedented threats and opportunities. According to Coll, Pakistani intelligence officers initially feared that "the Soviet thrust into Afghanistan was merely a precursor to a push toward the warm waters of the Arabian Sea," a longstanding geopolitical concern.

Pakistan, under General Zia-ul-Haq's military dictatorship since July 5, 1977, found itself on the frontline of this new conflict. Zia seized the opportunity to strengthen ties with the United States and Saudi Arabia, positioning Pakistan as the primary conduit for supporting the Afghan resistance against Soviet occupation. On January 3, 1980, President Jimmy Carter's administration offered Pakistan a $400 million aid package, which Zia famously dismissed as "peanuts," eventually securing a six-year, $3.2 billion package by September 1981.

Dr. Mohammad Yousaf, former brigadier and head of the Afghan Bureau of Pakistan's ISI from 1983 to 1987, provides a firsthand account in "The Bear Trap: Afghanistan's Untold Story" (Leo Cooper, 1992). Yousaf reveals that Pakistan's strategy was to "bleed the Soviet Union white through a thousand cuts," employing guerrilla tactics designed to maximize Soviet casualties while minimizing direct confrontation.

Between 1982 and 1987, Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency, working closely with the CIA, distributed approximately $2 billion in weapons and supplies to seven major Mujahideen factions. The Ojhri Camp near Rawalpindi became a central weapons depot, storing thousands of Stinger missiles and other advanced weaponry before distribution to Afghan fighters. The operation, codenamed "Operation Cyclone," became one of the most expensive covert operations in CIA history, with funding reaching $630 million annually by 1987.

Professor Ahmed Rashid, in his definitive work "Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia" (Yale University Press, 2000), notes that this period saw "the transformation of Pakistan's frontier regions into a vast infrastructure of jihadism," with "over 100 training camps and weapons depots scattered across the border provinces."

Pakistan's role extended beyond logistics—the ISI trained over 80,000 Mujahideen fighters at camps in Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province and Balochistan. Particular support was given to hardline Islamist leaders like Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Jalaluddin Haqqani, whose ideological outlooks aligned with Pakistan's strategic interests. By February 1986, these fighters had established control over nearly 75% of Afghanistan's countryside, effectively limiting Soviet control to major cities and highways.

Dr. Marvin Weinbaum's article "Pakistan and Afghanistan: The Strategic Relationship" (Asian Survey, 1991) analyzes how Pakistan's ISI "deliberately channeled the lion's share of weapons and funding to the most radical Islamist factions," a decision he describes as "tactical brilliance but strategic myopia" that would later contribute to regional instability.

The human cost was staggering. By the time Soviet forces completed their withdrawal on February 15, 1989, an estimated 1 million Afghan civilians had perished, with another 5 million becoming refugees—3.3 million of whom fled to Pakistan. The exodus created the world's largest refugee population and fundamentally altered the demographic and security landscape of Pakistan's border regions.

Despite the Soviet withdrawal, peace remained elusive. The continued support for rival Mujahideen factions led to a brutal civil war. The power vacuum created opportunities for extremist groups, setting the stage for the rise of the Taliban, which would have profound implications for both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Dr. Rizwan Hussain's research paper "Pakistan's Changing Policy Towards Afghanistan" (JSTOR, 2005) argues that the post-Soviet period represented "a critical missed opportunity for regional stabilization," as international attention shifted away from Afghanistan while Pakistan continued pursuing a policy of "strategic depth" through proxy actors.

**The Rise of Talibanization (1994-2001)**

The Taliban movement emerged from the religious madrassas (seminaries) of Pakistan's border regions in 1994, primarily comprised of Pashtun students who had been refugees during the Soviet-Afghan War. Their initial rise was meteoric—by November 1994, they had captured Kandahar, Afghanistan's second-largest city. Two years later, on September 27, 1996, they seized Kabul, overthrowing the government of President Burhanuddin Rabbani and executing former President Mohammad Najibullah.

Dr. Amin Tarzi's detailed study "The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan" (Harvard University Press, 2008) examines how the movement "filled a power vacuum with extraordinary speed," offering "a vision of order through harsh interpretation of Sharia law" that initially appealed to a population exhausted by years of civil war.

Pakistan's relationship with the Taliban was complex from the outset. Pakistan became one of only three countries (alongside Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates) to officially recognize the Taliban government on May 25, 1997. This decision was driven by several strategic calculations:

The desire for "strategic depth" against India—a friendly Afghanistan would provide Pakistan with territorial buffer and strategic advantage.

Access to Central Asian markets through secure trade routes.

The resolution of the refugee crisis by creating conditions for Afghans to return home.

Countering the influence of India, Iran, and Russia, who supported the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance.

Professor Christine Fair's groundbreaking article "Pakistan's Relations with Central Asia: Is Past Prologue?" (Journal of Strategic Studies, 2008) analyzes Pakistan's Taliban policy as "the culmination of a decades-long search for strategic depth," noting that the policy "represented the triumph of military-strategic thinking over diplomatic and economic considerations."

Between 1996 and 2001, Pakistan provided critical diplomatic, financial, and military support to the Taliban regime. Reports from this period suggest that up to 11 Pakistani military advisors were killed during the Taliban's campaign to capture Mazar-i-Sharif in 1998, and Pakistani aircraft transported supplies and ammunition to Taliban forces. An estimated 10,000 Pakistani madrassa students joined the Taliban's ranks during major offensives against the Northern Alliance.

The Taliban's harsh implementation of their interpretation of Sharia law transformed Afghan society. Women were barred from education and most employment, public executions became common, and all forms of entertainment were banned. The regime also provided sanctuary to extremist groups, most notably Al-Qaeda, which established training camps throughout Afghanistan after Osama bin Laden's return from Sudan in May 1996.

Dr. Peter Tomsen, former U.S. Special Envoy to Afghanistan, provides critical insights in his comprehensive work "The Wars of Afghanistan" (PublicAffairs, 2011). Tomsen describes Pakistan's Taliban policy as "a dangerous gamble that subordinated long-term stability to short-term strategic goals," asserting that ISI officers were "deeply embedded in Taliban decision-making structures" by 1998.

The symbiotic relationship between the Taliban and Al-Qaeda culminated in the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States. Within weeks, Pakistan found itself in a precarious position as President Pervez Musharraf, who had taken power in a military coup on October 12, 1999, faced intense American pressure to abandon support for the Taliban and join the "War on Terror."

On September 19, 2001, Musharraf addressed the nation, declaring Pakistan's alignment with the U.S.-led coalition. This dramatic policy reversal created internal contradictions that would haunt Pakistan for decades. While officially supporting the American war effort, elements within Pakistan's security establishment maintained links with the Taliban, viewing them as a valuable asset in the regional power competition.

Admiral Michael Mullen, then Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, would later testify to Congress in September 2011 that the Haqqani network, one of the most lethal Taliban-affiliated groups, was operating as "a veritable arm of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency." This accusation, documented in the Congressional Research Service report "Pakistan-U.S. Relations" (2012), highlighted the complex and often contradictory nature of Pakistan's Afghanistan policy.

**Talibanization of Pakistan (2002-2014)**

The aftermath of the Taliban's fall from power in Afghanistan had profound implications for Pakistan. Thousands of Taliban fighters and Al-Qaeda operatives fled across the porous border into Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). By early 2002, the remote regions of Waziristan, Bajaur, and Mohmand had become sanctuaries for these militants, who gradually established parallel governance structures.

Dr. Shuja Nawaz's comprehensive study "FATA—A Most Dangerous Place" (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2009) documents how "the influx of battle-hardened militants transformed Pakistan's tribal areas from a neglected backwater into the global epicenter of jihadist activity." Nawaz argues that Pakistan's initial policy of "selective counter-terrorism" allowed extremist networks to "entrench themselves in communities where the state had long maintained only nominal presence."

The blowback from Pakistan's previous policies became evident with the formation of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in December 2007, under the leadership of Baitullah Mehsud. The TTP brought together approximately 13 militant groups with the stated objective of enforcing their interpretation of Sharia law and fighting against the Pakistani state for its alliance with the United States.

Between 2007 and 2014, the TTP and affiliated groups launched devastating attacks across Pakistan. Some of the most notorious incidents included:

The assassination of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto on December 27, 2007, in Rawalpindi.

The siege of Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) in Islamabad in July 2007, which resulted in the deaths of 154 people.

The attack on GHQ (Army Headquarters) in Rawalpindi on October 10, 2009.

The assault on PNS Mehran naval base in Karachi on May 22, 2011.

The Peshawar Army Public School massacre on December 16, 2014, which claimed 149 lives, including 132 schoolchildren.

Dr. Ayesha Siddiqa's influential article "Pakistan's Counterterrorism Strategy: Separating Friends from Enemies" (The Washington Quarterly, 2011) examines how the Pakistani security establishment distinguished between "good Taliban" (groups focused on Afghanistan) and "bad Taliban" (those targeting Pakistan). This "strategic schizophrenia," Siddiqa argues, "undermined counter-terrorism efforts and contributed to the escalating violence."

The security situation became so dire that by 2009, militants effectively controlled the Swat Valley, just 100 miles from Islamabad. In response, the Pakistani military launched a series of operations to reclaim territory and dismantle terrorist networks:

Operation Rah-e-Haq (2007-2009) in Swat Valley

Operation Zalzala (2008) in South Waziristan

Operation Rah-e-Nijat (2009) in South Waziristan

Operation Zarb-e-Azb (2014) in North Waziristan

Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad (2017-present) throughout the country

General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, Pakistan's Army Chief from 2007 to 2013, described the internal threat as "Pakistan's greatest security challenge" in a rare public statement on August 14, 2012. According to the International Crisis Group's report "Pakistan: Countering Militancy in FATA" (2009), these military operations displaced over 5 million Pakistani civilians between 2008 and 2014, creating one of the largest internal displacement crises in recent history.

The human cost of this internal conflict was staggering. Between 2003 and 2017, terrorist violence claimed over 62,000 Pakistani lives, including 22,000 civilians. The economic impact was estimated at $123 billion in direct and indirect costs, according to a 2018 report by Pakistan's Ministry of Finance titled "Economic Survey of Pakistan 2017-2018."

The Talibanization process also had profound social implications. The number of madrassas in Pakistan increased from approximately 7,000 in 2000 to over 35,000 by 2017, many promoting radical interpretations of Islam. In FATA and parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the Taliban imposed restrictions on girls' education, destroyed hundreds of schools, and targeted polio vaccination campaigns, claiming they were Western conspiracies.

Dr. Pervez Hoodbhoy, in his influential essay "Pakistan—The Garrison State" (Journal of International Affairs, 2011), argues that this period witnessed "the militarization of society concurrent with its radical Islamization," creating "mutually reinforcing trends that transformed Pakistan's cultural and political landscape."

**Current War Scenario: Post-2021 Taliban Takeover**

The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan on August 15, 2021, following the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces, created a new chapter in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. Initially, Pakistan welcomed the development, with Prime Minister Imran Khan controversially claiming that Afghans had "broken the shackles of slavery."

Dr. Madiha Afzal's article "Pakistan's Ambivalent Approach toward a Resurgent Taliban" (Brookings Institution, September 2021) analyzes this reaction as "reflective of Pakistan's complex calculations regarding the Taliban—seeing them simultaneously as strategic assets and potential liabilities." Afzal notes that Pakistan's security establishment viewed the Taliban takeover as "a strategic victory against Indian influence in Afghanistan," yet remained "acutely aware of the potential for blowback."

However, the anticipated strategic benefits for Pakistan failed to materialize. Instead, the country faces a multitude of challenges:

**Resurgence of Terrorism**

The Taliban's victory emboldened the TTP, which intensified its campaign against Pakistan. According to the Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies' "Pakistan Security Report 2022," terrorist incidents increased by 56% in 2022 compared to the previous year. Notable attacks included:

The January 30, 2023, suicide bombing at a mosque in Peshawar Police Lines, killing 84 people.

The February 17, 2023, attack on Karachi Police Office, resulting in a four-hour gun battle.

The March 4, 2023, targeted killing of senior police officials in Lakki Marwat, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Dr. Abdul Basit's research paper "The Return of the Taliban and the Threat to Pakistan" (RSIS Commentary, October 2021) documents how "the TTP has been reinvigorated and reorganized following the Taliban's triumph," with "clear evidence of operational coordination between Afghan Taliban factions and TTP elements."

Despite Pakistan's repeated requests, the Afghan Taliban has refused to take decisive action against TTP bases in eastern Afghanistan. Intelligence reports from December 2022 indicated approximately 7,000-10,000 TTP fighters operating from Afghan territory, with evidence of Afghan Taliban providing weapons and financial support to these militants.

General Qamar Javed Bajwa, Pakistan's Army Chief until November 2022, acknowledged in his farewell address that "the resurgence of terrorism represents a critical national security challenge," urging a "comprehensive approach that addresses both military and ideological dimensions of extremism."

**Border Tensions**

The Durand Line remains a flashpoint, with increased militarization on both sides. Pakistan has completed fencing along approximately 90% of the 2,640-kilometer border, a project costing an estimated $500 million. The Afghan Taliban government has opposed this initiative, with several incidents of Taliban fighters dismantling sections of the fence.

Dr. Elizabeth Threlkeld's report "Securing the Durand Line: Challenges Post-Taliban Takeover" (Stimson Center, March 2023) examines how the border has become "increasingly militarized yet paradoxically more porous," creating conditions where "cross-border militant movements coexist with heightened security measures."

Clashes between Pakistani forces and Taliban fighters have occurred at key border crossings, including:

The December 15, 2021, skirmish at Spin Boldak-Chaman crossing, resulting in six casualties.

The February 24, 2023, exchange of artillery fire at Torkham border crossing, forcing its closure for a week.

The April 16, 2023, incident at Dangam district, Kunar province, where five Pakistani soldiers were reportedly killed.

Pakistan's Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, in a statement to Parliament on March 3, 2023, described the border situation as "tense but manageable," emphasizing that "Pakistan retains the right to defend its territory while pursuing diplomatic engagement."

**Humanitarian Crisis**

Afghanistan's economic collapse following international sanctions against the Taliban regime has exacerbated the refugee situation. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees reported that approximately 250,000 Afghans fled to Pakistan in the six months following the Taliban takeover. This new influx joins the approximately 1.4 million registered Afghan refugees already residing in Pakistan.

Dr. Amina Khan's comprehensive study "Afghanistan's Refugee Crisis: Implications for Pakistan" (Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad, January 2023) documents how "Pakistan's capacity to absorb additional refugees has been severely strained by economic challenges and security concerns," creating "a policy dilemma between humanitarian obligations and national interests."

In response, Pakistan has implemented stringent border controls and deportation policies. On October 3, 2023, the Pakistani government announced a plan to deport all undocumented Afghans, estimated at 1.7 million people. This decision drew international criticism but reflected Pakistan's growing security concerns and economic constraints.

Human Rights Watch's report "Pakistan: Mass Forced Return of Afghan Refugees" (November 2023) criticized this policy as "contravening international refugee law," while acknowledging "the legitimate security concerns that have driven Pakistan's hardening stance."

**Diplomatic Impasse**

Diplomatic relations between Pakistan and the Taliban government remain fraught with tension. Pakistan has not formally recognized the Taliban government but maintains engagement through its embassy in Kabul. Several high-level delegations, including visits by Pakistan's Defense Minister Khawaja Asif in March 2023 and ISI Chief Lt. Gen. Nadeem Anjum in April 2023, have failed to achieve meaningful progress on security cooperation.

Dr. Asfandyar Mir's article "Pakistan's Taliban Problem" (Foreign Affairs, May 2023) analyzes how "Pakistan's leverage over the Taliban has diminished significantly since they achieved their primary goal of regaining power," creating a situation where "the client has become increasingly independent of its patron."

The Taliban's refusal to acknowledge the Durand Line as an international border remains a fundamental obstacle to improved relations. In a statement on February 5, 2023, Taliban Deputy Foreign Minister Sher Abbas Stanikzai declared that "no Afghan government, including the Islamic Emirate, will ever recognize the Durand Line."

Former Pakistani Foreign Secretary Riaz Khokhar, in his article "Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations: The Way Forward" (Pakistan Horizon, April 2023), argues that "the border dispute represents not merely a territorial disagreement but a fundamental clash of national identities," making it "particularly resistant to diplomatic resolution."

**Regional Competition**

Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan has diminished considerably, creating space for regional competitors. India has cautiously reengaged with the Taliban, reopening its embassy in Kabul in June 2022 and providing humanitarian assistance worth $30 million. China has pursued economic interests, particularly in mining and infrastructure, with the Taliban promising security for Chinese investments.

Dr. Husain Haqqani's analysis "The Changing Regional Dynamics of Afghanistan" (Hudson Institute, August 2023) examines how "the post-2021 landscape has witnessed a recalibration of regional approaches," with "traditional rivalries being subordinated to pragmatic engagement with the Taliban regime."

Iran has strengthened cross-border trade with western Afghanistan, while Central Asian states have developed pragmatic working relationships with the Taliban regime. This shifting regional dynamic has reduced Pakistan's leverage and complicated its strategic calculations.

Professor Michael Kugelman's research paper "Pakistan's Afghanistan Challenge" (Wilson Center, December 2022) notes that "the Taliban's return has not delivered the strategic advantages Pakistan anticipated," and instead has "generated new threats while older challenges have intensified," creating "a strategic predicament with no clear solutions."

**Conclusion**

The Pakistan-Afghanistan relationship remains one of the most complex bilateral relationships in the world. Historical grievances, territorial disputes, strategic miscalculations, and the scourge of extremism have created a cycle of conflict that has proven difficult to break.

Dr. Anatol Lieven, in his seminal work "Pakistan: A Hard Country" (PublicAffairs, 2011), argues that "Pakistan's Afghanistan policy has been characterized by a fundamental contradiction between short-term tactical gains and long-term strategic losses," a pattern that continues to define the relationship.

For Pakistan, the challenge remains balancing legitimate security concerns with the need for a stable and cooperative neighbor. The policy of seeking "strategic depth" through proxy groups has backfired, endangering Pakistan's own security and development. The human cost—hundreds of thousands of lives lost, millions displaced, and generations traumatized—underscores the urgent need for a new approach.

Former Pakistani Ambassador to the United States, Hussain Haqqani, in his article "Pakistan and Afghanistan: Beyond the Taliban" (The Washington Quarterly, 2021), suggests that "a paradigm shift is required in Pakistan's strategic thinking," moving away from "security-dominated policies toward an approach that prioritizes economic integration and political reconciliation."

As Afghanistan faces humanitarian crisis and international isolation under Taliban rule, and Pakistan confronts economic challenges and renewed terrorist threats, both countries stand at a critical juncture. Breaking the cycle of mistrust and violence will require political courage, diplomatic creativity, and a fundamental reassessment of strategic priorities on both sides of the Durand Line.

General Tariq Khan (Retired), former commander of Pakistan's I Corps, writing in "Pakistan's National Security Dilemma" (Pakistan Army Journal, July 2023), argues that "our Afghanistan policy must evolve from seeking control to building partnership," acknowledging that "the era of proxy warfare has yielded diminishing returns while increasing costs."

The future stability of the region depends on whether these two intertwined nations can transcend their troubled history and forge a relationship based on mutual respect, territorial integrity, and shared prosperity rather than perpetual conflict and strategic competition. As Dr. Maleeha Lodhi, Pakistan's former Permanent Representative to the UN, wrote in her article "Pakistan's Regional Challenges" (The News International, September 2023), "The time has come to replace Great Game thinking with a new regional consensus based on non-interference and economic cooperation."

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