

# The Af-Pak Border Stalemate

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On the 8<sup>th</sup> of April, a Pakistani helicopter dramatically hovered over the Orakzai and the Kurram region near Pakistan's border with Afghanistan. Alerting the entire Durand with its drill, the scheduled vigilance down the lines of tribes did create an uncalled for commotion, but none that was uncommon holding the strategic vulnerability of the terrain. Several hours later, Reuters reported supposed casualties, rooting from the same alleged 'drill', which killed (officially) fourteen militants.

From a distance, such a responsible and egalitarian approach by the Pakistan military can be deemed to be cohesive and in conjoint terms with the country's pledge against terror. But a closer look will reveal conflicting facts and detach the unassuming prose from the ground reality of the Af-Pak border stalemate.

## Ground Reality

After 9/11, Pakistan allied itself with the United States in its war on terror. This placed Pakistan in between a rock and a hard place, as it now had to hunt down the Taliban and the Islamic militant organisations it reportedly helped create in the first place. It had to send its troops into the tribal lands where the Pakistani military has never been welcomed. Reports of Pakistani soldiers surrendering without a fight to militant organisations became sour news. And thus, without further ado, the United States intervened, not only via diplomatic channels but also physically in and around Afghanistan, managing to sweep much of the militant nexus (not without civilian casualties) much to the shame of Islamabad and the Pakistani militia.

After the Osama Bin Laden episode, Pakistan's stand against radical organisations became much clearer. And inevitably, by then, Washington had run out of endurance and the motivation to allow thick domestic aids and diplomatic immunities to Pakistan. Predictably, the amenities were rolled back to a severe low, and Pakistan duly noted that its honeymoon with the United States could not be extended further. Hence it conjured up a rather risky and pulse testing alliance with China, an old and continuing rival of the United States. Despite much initial apprehension, China and Pakistan found a common shade in their geopolitical ambition, at least in theory. And now, what we are observing is nothing but a power flex of the new found alliance. Nonetheless, if put to test, analysts foretell how offensively disregarding China will be of Pakistani interests. Such a speculation cannot be completely brushed away, given China's diplomatic history.

The Pakistan that was inadequately equipped to fight extremist organisations and the Durand Line (that was as porous as a phloem sieve), two to three years back, are now in polar contrast to what was the reality then. Pakistan's objective interest in Central Asia, specifically in Afghanistan, is to utilise its geographical vantage point and secure it as a position of depth, for both the stationing of vulnerable military assets and the passage of military supplies, in the event of hostilities with India. Within this context, Pakistan's ideal interest of a supportive Muslim neighbour, is unstable and would inescapably be undermined by its ongoing dispute over Pashtunistan. And now, in addition to the clash of interests with Afghanistan, Pakistan has cooked up problems of its own by shifting loyalties from the United States to China.

### **Plan of Action: 'Soft Border'**

Pakistan's immediate strategy is to avoid transparent negotiations and to emphasise its lack of freedom of action for three reasons. First, it is fearful that direct negotiations with the United States or Afghanistan, regarding the frontier sanctuaries, could lead to consideration of self-determination for the Pashtun and Baloch people there as a means of reducing the effects of Islamist influence. Second, Pakistan cannot obtain any dispensation from Afghanistan as long as NATO is backing the administration in Kabul. Third, Pakistan does not want to fracture the Islamist movement that is countering the Pashtun separatism. This stance will prevail until the NATO forces recede from the Kabul commitment entirely, barring retaliatory measures like that of the mentioned insurgent killings and the mysterious 2011 rocket attacks in

the Kunar-Nangarhar region to avenge for the killings of a hundred Pakistani border sentinel.

Since the nineteenth century, Kabul has never been able to maintain internal order without external financing. Afghanistan's ability to manage its external threats is forever beyond its reach given the relative size of its neighbours and is dependent entirely on alliance security currently provided by NATO. Also, NATO has been exercising a few non-escalatory military options by inviting greater Indian participation, re-routing trade through Iran, pushing the self-determination of the Pashtun or Baloch people. However, as NATO's unrelenting withdrawal from Afghanistan is rolling rapidly, the hindering geopolitical speed breakers for Pakistan are coming to an expected halt.

### **Endless, Unscrupulous Possibilities**

"People on both sides of the Durand line consider it a soft border. Pashtuns consider it their own land even though there is also a loyalty to the respective states along with a desire to freely move back and forth," said Husain Haqqani, Pakistan's former ambassador to Washington, and quite correctly.

Both the Pashtuns and Balochis gain much of their income from cross-border smuggling. Thanks to the largely permeable border and people from similar ethnic groups straddling both its sides, the borderlands already have become a land bridge for the criminal (drugs) and criminalised (transit trade) economies of the region. The transborder political and military networks between the two countries are reinforced as well as funded and armed by criminal activities such as trafficking in drugs, arms, and even people. By the eventual disappearance of the NATO forces, any restraint on the aforementioned fronts seems like an impossibility. If anything, there'll be a pathological rise in the cross-border crime rate in the absence of a much required warder.

Afghanistan shelters Baloch nationalists within its territory, while Pakistan aims for a notch higher by extending training and refuge to the mujahedeen and the Afghan Taliban. By supporting Islamist militias among the Pashtun, Pakistan's government has tried to neutralise Baloch and Pashtun nationalism within its borders. Using Balochistan as a base of operation and sanctuary and recruiting from its extensive madrassa network, the Taliban and its Pakistani allies are undermining the state-building effort in Afghanistan. Pakistan's former President Pervez Musharraf had repeatedly denied this despite ample evidence.

Pakistan's passivity is reinforced by the cost of an intervention of sufficient scale to dominate the tribal areas, which in its worst manifestation, could result

in the equivalent of the 1897 Great Tribal Revolt that preoccupied the British. Militarily suppressing the Taliban may provoke the Pashtun, given the difficulty of disentangling tribal from religious sentiments in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and inflame areas within the NWFP. Furthermore, any intervention would likely have only a marginal effect on the strength of the Taliban given the importation of weapons from Central Asia and reliance on Afghan drug production.

As long as Afghanistan retains the possibility of encouraging a secessionist revolt among the Pakistani Pashtun tribes with which it maintains contact, Pakistan has an incentive to preserve an Islamist counter-balance. One Pakistani concern is that if the Islamists are suppressed they may not only be supplanted by Pashtun nationalists but they may be more difficult to resurrect. Among the Pashtun in particular, Pashtunwali culture has traditionally been more influential than Islam, and Taliban successes in pushing Salafist tenets among the Pashtun were transient. During the Afghanistan War, to avert a subsequent Pashtun uprising, the ISI resisted the CIA's policy of widely distributing weapons and instead channelled the weapons to seven primary Islamist groups that were still never reliably under Pakistan's control. Currently most tribal Pashtun leaders support a form of Pashtun sovereignty within Pakistan (Pashtunkwa), but there are nevertheless substantial tribal factions that have pretensions towards an independent Pashtunistan, additionally contributing to the frontier cul-de-sac.