

THE APPROACHES OF EXTERNAL FORCES ON DURAND LINE PROBLEM

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Abstract

In this article, the issue of the “Durand line” is analyzed not only as a border dispute between Afghanistan and Pakistan, but also from the perspective of the clash of interests among regional and global power centers. The article also extensively discusses how the provision of regional stability is closely linked to the alignment of major powers’ strategic interests, security policies, and diplomatic approaches. Furthermore, the article provides a detailed account of the positions of the United States, China, India, the United Kingdom, and Iran regarding the “Durand line”.

Keywords: Durand line, “Taliban” movement, “AfPak” strategy, Pashtunistan, Greater Middle East, New Middle East, Free Baluchistan, Eastern Turkistan islomic movement, China-Pakistan economic corridor (CPEC), One Belt – One Road.

Introduction

The “Durand line” issue occupies an important place in contemporary international relations, particularly within the geopolitical dynamics of South Asia. It represents not only a border dispute between Afghanistan and Pakistan, but is also directly linked to the strategic interests of major power centers in the region, each of which has developed its own distinct approach toward the “Durand line”. In this context, the United States and India are seen as destabilizing forces, while Iran and China appear as actors interested in regional stability. The United Kingdom, as the successor state to the power that historically created this line, continues to preserve its historical-political stance to this day.

Moreover, the article highlights the impact of U.S. geopolitical projects—from the “AfPak” strategy to the “Greater Middle East” initiative—on the “Durand Line” issue, both directly and indirectly. India’s intelligence activities against Pakistan, Iran’s firm opposition to separatism, China’s emphasis on territorial integrity within the framework of the “Belt and Road Initiative”, as well as Britain’s consistent policy of recognition since 1956—all demonstrate that this border dispute has evolved into a complex clash of interests, not only between two states, but also among regional and global powers.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

The Afghanist scholar Suhrob Buronov, in his research, analyzes the positions of Afghanistan and Pakistan regarding the “Durand line” and concludes that resolving this issue would lay the foundation for lasting peace in Afghanistan. Such viewpoints are also reflected in his monograph “Uzbekistan’s Geopolitics in the Processes of Establishing Peace and Stability in Afghanistan”. The information presented in this monographic study plays a significant role in the in-depth examination of Pakistan’s influence on Afghanistan’s political situation, the ethno-territorial

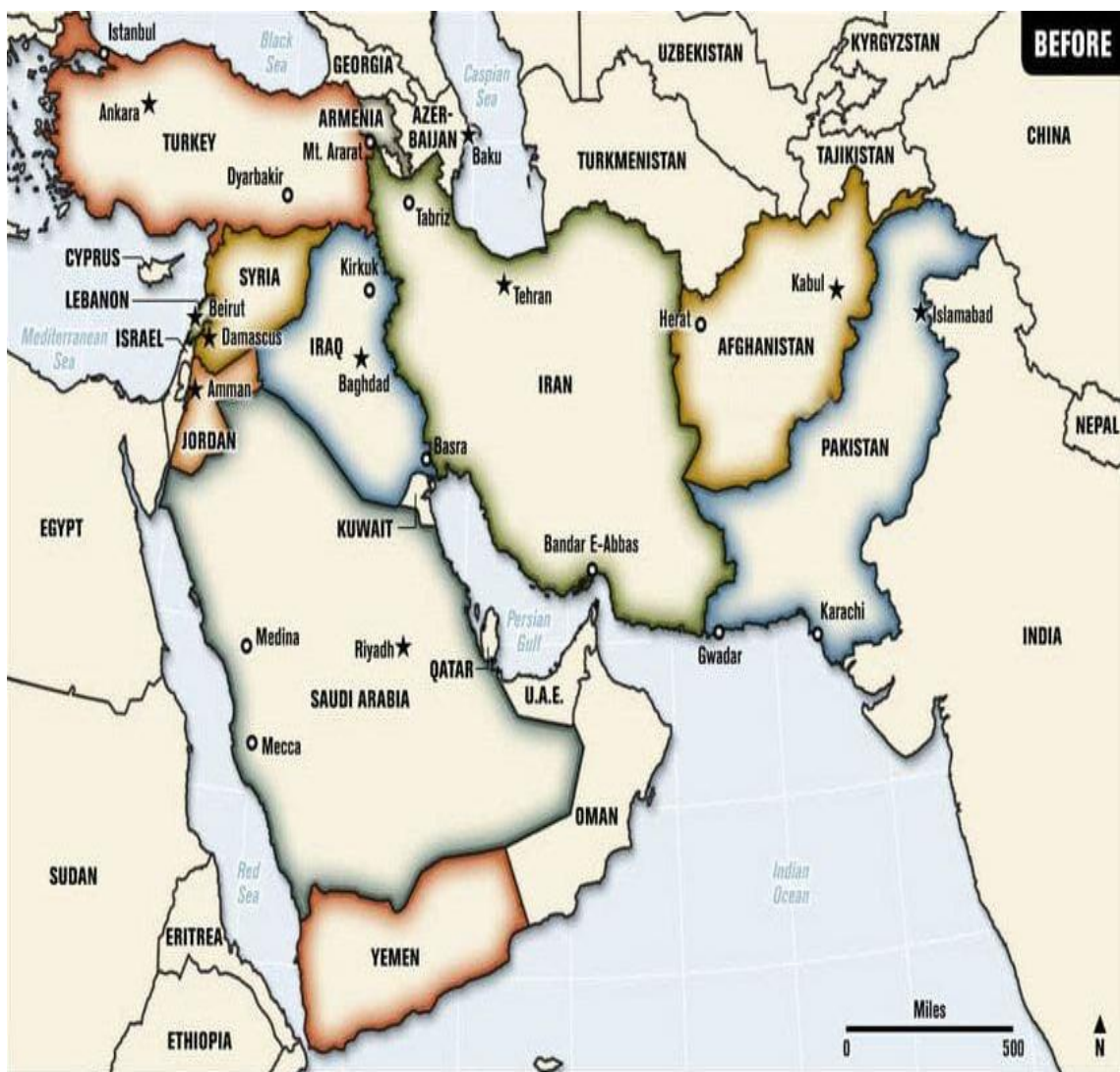


problems related to the Pashtuns, and the reasons behind the emergence of the Taliban movement on Afghanistan's political scene.

In the monograph "The Afghan Factor in Security Issues between the United States and Pakistan" by Mutalib Kasimov, Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Political Science, the Afghanistan problem—one of the most pressing issues in world politics—is examined, focusing on its impact on security relations between the United States and Pakistan. The monograph also highlights the influence of the current situation in Afghanistan on regional and international security, the U.S. "AfPak" and "PakAf" strategies, Pakistan's cooperation with the United States on the Afghan issue, as well as Uzbekistan's cooperation with both the U.S. and Pakistan in stabilizing the situation in Afghanistan.

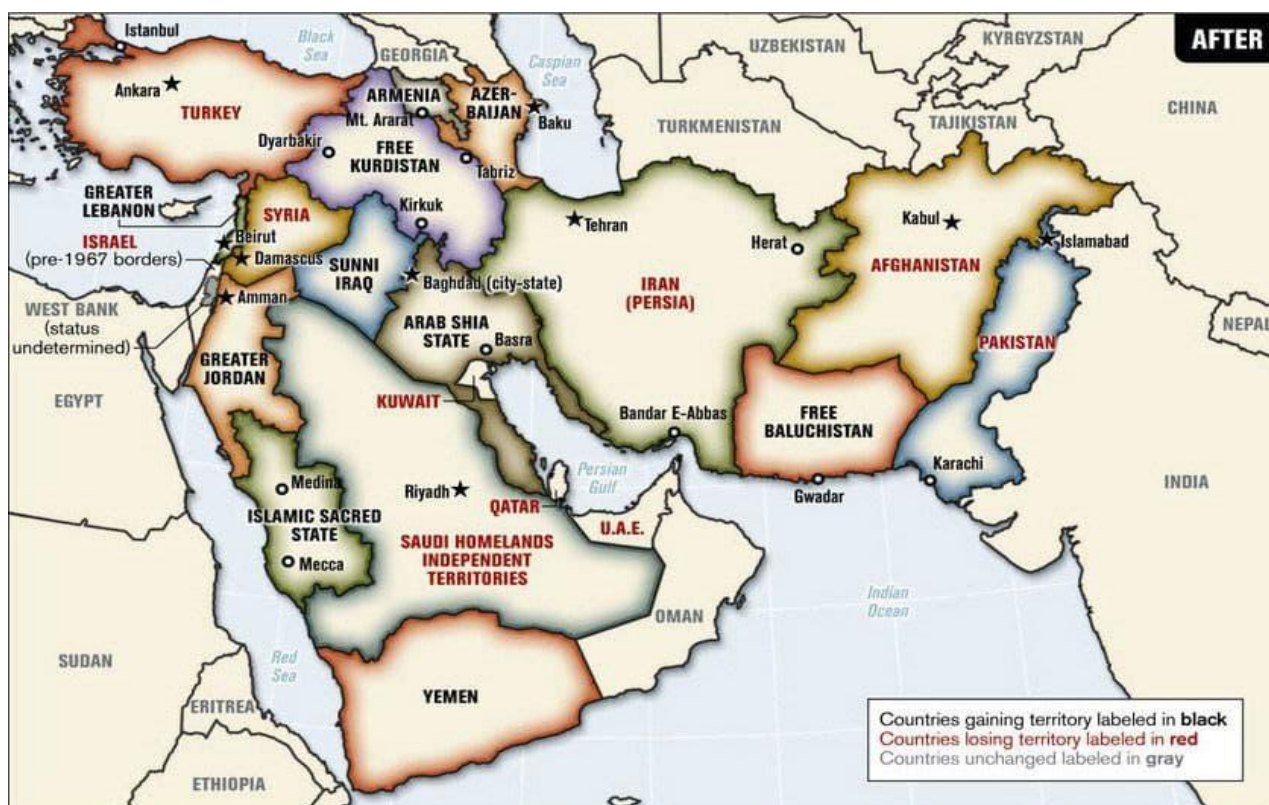
In this article, comparative and content analysis methods were employed.

RESULTS



picture "Map of the "Greater Middle East"





2-picture “Map of the “New Middle East” Concept”

DISCUSSION

Although the “Durand Line” problem is primarily regarded as a border dispute between Afghanistan and Pakistan, it is also reasonable to analyze the approaches of external actors, particularly major power centers, toward this border. Indeed, this line represents a geopolitical space that reflects the interests of states such as the United States and India (destabilizing powers), and Iran and China (actors interested in stability). In addition, the positions of neighboring countries as well as the successors of empires that influenced the creation of this line—the Russian Federation and the United Kingdom—are also discussed in detail below.

The United States of America. The United States officially recognized the “Durand line” as Pakistan’s international border in 1956 and maintained the same position in its relations with the governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1978 [1]. Washington’s stance has remained unchanged to this day.

With the deployment of U.S. military forces in Afghanistan in 2001, Washington began to pay particular attention to the Afghan–Pakistani border, especially the “Durand line”. A number of American statesmen advanced the view that Afghanistan and Pakistan should not be regarded as separate spaces but as a single domain—an approach known as the “AfPak” strategy. Experts associate the term “AfPak” with the Obama administration, although its origins date back to 2007–2008. The author of this concept is considered to be U.S. diplomat Richard Holbrooke. He served as the U.S. President’s Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan. In March 2008, R. Holbrooke emphasized the necessity of considering Afghanistan and Pakistan as a single politico-military space for the following reasons:

- the existence of a common theater of operations along the Afghanistan–Pakistan border;

- the border problem associated with the “Durand line” between Afghanistan and Pakistan;
- the Taliban’s exploitation of the open border regime (primarily in the tribal areas’) between Afghanistan and Pakistan for terrorist networks [2].

The institutionalization of the term “AfPak” at the official level indicated that Holbrooke’s theoretical views were being transformed into a political project aimed at resolving the Afghan conflict. The main elements of this project were as follows:

- viewing Afghanistan and Pakistan as a single territorial-political entity;
- expanding the “AfPak” framework to encompass the Kashmir issue and, in the future, challenges in Central Asia;
- reshaping Afghanistan’s political system through the inclusion of “peaceful Taliban” elements;
- involving Pakistan in addressing Afghanistan’s problems;
- regarding Pakistan, like Afghanistan, as a theater of military operations in the fight against al-Qaeda;
- expanding the battlefield against al-Qaeda by linking it with the struggle against militant Taliban factions operating in Pakistan;
- addressing Afghanistan–Pakistan issues jointly with Kabul and Islamabad;
- seeking to resolve the conflict by offering joint U.S. (NATO) security guarantees to both Pakistan and Afghanistan[3].

According to the analyses of Mutalib Kasimov, PhD in Political Science, the U.S. “AfPak” strategy failed to achieve its intended goals. In our view, the strategy of framing Afghanistan and Pakistan as a single space gives the impression of implicitly supporting the idea of “Pashtunistan”. The notion of unifying the Pashtuns living in both countries has always been a matter of concern for Pakistan. Moreover, it can be argued that the unresolved nature of the “Durand line” issue hindered the implementation of the “AfPak” strategy[3]. Within the United States’ strategic plans for this region, there are certain concepts that imply the creation of new independent states. Among them, the “New Middle East” concept stands out as part of such a strategy. In June 2006, in the city of Tel Aviv, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice publicly announced the introduction of the term “New Middle East” (Figure 2) in place of the already outdated yet influential term “Greater Middle East” (Figure 1). She is regarded by Western mass media as the originator of this term.

This concept, formulated entirely in a neoconservative spirit, reflects significant aspects of U.S. foreign policy strategy in the Middle East. One of its notable features was emphasized simultaneously with the launch of the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan oil terminal. According to C.Rice, the “New Middle East” project was to begin from Lebanon. Experts consider this threat to be a “roadmap” for the Middle East jointly developed by the United States, the United Kingdom, and Israel. The concept is designed to intensify conflict zones and disorder in the region, fostering the forces of “constructive chaos”. Through the “New Middle East”, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Israel sought the opportunity to reshape the map of the Middle East in accordance with their own geostrategic and other interests. The development of the ‘New Middle East’ project also brought about the creation of its map.

The geopolitical map of the “New Middle East” was developed by retired U.S. Colonel Ralph Peters. The map constitutes an important part of R.Peters’ book *Never Quit the Fight*, which was presented to the public on July 10, 2006. In addition, the same map was published by Peters in



the U.S. Armed Forces journal under the title “Blood Borders: How a Better Middle East Would Look”[4].

According to Ralph Peters’ map, the current borders of the Middle East region do not correspond to historical, ethnic, and national realities. Consequently, many problems remain unresolved, which implies the necessity of border changes. Such transformations, Peters suggests, could occur as a result of intense interstate politics, as well as armed conflicts driven by internal and inter-confessional contradictions[5].

The map envisions the creation of new states: an Arab Shia State, a Holy Islamic State, “Free Kurdistan” and “Free Baluchistan”. In particular, the map illustrates the establishment of a “Free Baluchistan” that would encompass a significant portion of the territories of Afghanistan and Pakistan. These U.S. geopolitical concepts are distinguished by their underlying aim of reducing the influence of Iran and China in the region.

Furthermore, Washington’s official position on the “Durand line” is unequivocal: it is recognized as the international border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. In 2012, then–U.S. State Department spokesperson Victoria Nuland stated: “The Durand Line is the internationally recognized boundary between Pakistan and Afghanistan, and that is part of U.S. policy”. Later, her successor John Kirby reaffirmed that this stance had not changed, remarking: “We have no new policy with respect to the borders of Afghanistan”. He clearly reiterated that the United States recognizes the “Durand line” as an international border [7].

In 2017, this position was further emphasized, with proposals to make it even more stringent. According to U.S. Congressman Brad Sherman, a Democrat from California, U.S. assistance to Afghanistan should be conditioned upon Kabul’s recognition of the Durand Line as the 2,430-kilometer boundary between Pakistan and Afghanistan. He argued that such recognition would facilitate important negotiations with Pakistan, noting: “As long as Afghanistan continues to claim Pakistani territory, it will be very difficult to bring Pakistanis on board, even though we need them to participate as much as we want in controlling the Taliban”[8].

Despite the presence of U.S. troops in Afghanistan for two decades (2001–2021), Washington was unable to secure Kabul’s formal recognition of the Durand Line as a legitimate border. Notably, after the U.S. withdrawal and the Taliban’s takeover of Kabul, the American position remained unchanged. Official Washington reaffirmed its support for the territorial integrity of Afghanistan and Pakistan within their internationally recognized borders. Commenting on the Taliban’s recent claims regarding the “Durand line”, then–State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller declared: “We support the territorial integrity of Afghanistan and Pakistan within their internationally recognized borders. Like other major world powers, the United States recognizes the Durand Line as an international boundary”[7].

The Islamic Republic of Iran. Although the “Durand line” does not directly affect Tehran’s border-related considerations, it may have indirect implications. For instance, ethnic conflicts along the “Durand line”—particularly the Pashtun notion of “Pashtunistan”—could, to some extent, inspire separatist movements among the Baluch population residing along Iran’s borders. This, in turn, may fuel efforts to establish an “Independent Baluchistan” or a “Greater Baluchistan” thereby undermining Iran’s territorial integrity. From this perspective, Tehran’s stance is similar to that of Pakistan, considering it necessary to oppose any separatist movement in the region. Consequently, taking into account its territorial integrity and geopolitical interests,



Iran has cooperated with Pakistan on this issue.

Afghanist scholar S.Buronov explains other reasons for Iran's cooperation with Pakistan as follows: "In Tehran's contemporary geopolitical outlook, a policy of cooperation with Islamabad has gained priority in order to reduce Washington's and the Gulf Arab monarchies' influence on Afghanistan. One of the main reasons for this is the frequently changing nature of U.S.–Pakistan relations in recent years; another is Washington's urgent need to rely on the Saudi–Pakistani tandem against Iran in the context of the U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan"[9].

The Republic of India. India's position regarding the "Durand line" is clear and explicit: New-Delhi is interested in the non-recognition of the "Durand line" as an international border and in the activation of separatist groups around it. Such developments could pave the way for the creation of a "Pashtunistan" state and the disintegration of Pakistan. India's approach to the "Durand line" issue encompasses four main aspects:

- India strongly condemns human rights violations committed by Pakistan in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa region, where Pashtuns predominantly reside;
- India undertakes measures to safeguard Hindu and Buddhist historical sites located in the Pashtun-dominated areas of Pakistan. This necessity arises from the destruction of these monuments by terrorist groups in the FATA and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, coupled with the Pakistani government's ineffective protection;
- The majority of terrorist groups, with active support from Pakistan, operate in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and FATA, posing a threat to peace and security in Afghanistan. India prefers to cooperate with Afghanistan in combating the threat of terrorism;
- India is prepared to provide Afghanistan with legal and technical assistance in resolving the Durand Line problem [10].

Indian officials, moreover, pursue military, diplomatic, and other measures along the Afghanistan–Pakistan border to promote the establishment of a separate state or states, much like Bangladesh in the past. **There are specific reasons underlying this stance.** Professor Joshi Nirmala writes about India's interests in this regard as follows: "India's interest lies in not perceiving Afghanistan as a center of religious extremism and terrorism. However, officially, India remains concerned about the Taliban's close ties with Pakistan, their fundamentalist agreements, and the extensive involvement of Afghan mercenaries in military operations in Jammu and Kashmir" [11].

Nevertheless, while there are similarities between the Taliban's current activities since their return to power in 2021 and the policies they pursued in Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001, there are also notable differences. In particular, the Taliban's relations with India have warmed considerably. A clear example of this shift is New Delhi's involvement in financing projects that counter Pakistan's influence. At this point, one could aptly apply the saying: "Former enemies have become friends, while former friends have turned into enemies".

According to certain reports, India's Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) has conducted various operations against Pakistan in border areas in cooperation with Afghanistan's National Directorate of Security (NDS). For example, in his book on intelligence games in Afghanistan, renowned expert Musa Khan Jalalzai presents significant evidence of RAW and NDS collaboration in operations against Pakistan in Baluchistan, their close ties with Baluch separatist



leaders, and RAW's creation of an espionage network against Pakistan in border areas with the tactical support of U.S. (CIA) and Israeli (Mossad) intelligence agencies [9].

Moreover, according to Indian Army General Ajay Chandpuria, U.S. military equipment left behind in Afghanistan has been discovered in Kashmir and intended for use by terrorists. Chandpuria further noted that these weapons were transported to Kashmir through Pakistan, that approximately 150–200 terrorists are becoming active in Kashmir, and that 40–45 percent of them are Pakistanis with combat experience gained in Afghanistan. Naturally, such factors compel India to put its stance on the “Durand line” into practice.

People's Republic of China. Official Beijing is determined not to allow Afghanistan to once again become a safe haven for radical groups and their allies. This approach is particularly aimed at preventing any direct or indirect support for the “East Turkestan Islamic Movement” (ETIM), which seeks independence for the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region in western China. The primary area of activity of this movement remains the Afghanistan–Pakistan border. In this regard, Beijing supports Pakistan's position on the “Durand line” as it fully corresponds to China's internal and foreign policy principle of “territorial integrity”.

At the same time, China has invested heavily in the “China–Pakistan Economic Corridor” (CPEC), an integral part of the “Belt and Road Initiative”. Since this corridor passes through areas adjoining the Afghanistan–Pakistan border, Beijing has consistently emphasized the need for security guarantees and for combating various separatist groups in this region.

The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

As the power directly responsible for the creation of the “Durand line” and later for its transformation into a recognized border between Pakistan and Afghanistan, official London declared its position as early as 1956. At that time, the British government announced its continued recognition of the “Durand line” as the international boundary between Pakistan and Afghanistan. This statement was made in the British Parliament by then-Prime Minister Harold Macmillan. His assertion regarding the legality of the border drawn along the “Durand line” has not lost its validity to this day.

CONCLUSION

In general, from the past to the present, it can be observed that conflicts and, in certain cases, armed clashes along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border have involved both direct and indirect interventions by third parties or external powers. The geopolitical interests of the United States, India, Iran, and China are likely to come into conflict with one another over the “Durand line”. This, in turn, highlights the necessity for the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan to resolve the issue of the “Durand line” through mutual negotiations and agreements.

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