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QUESTION

PAK - Afghan relations continue to remain tensed even after mediation by China. What do you think are the major factors and how could it be improved?

ANSWER

INTRODUCTION

Since the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in 2021, relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan have remained tensed and uneasy. Pakistan accuses Kabul of allowing TTP to operate from Afghan soil against Pakistan, while Taliban condemns Pakistan's cross border strikes as violations of sovereignty. There are several causes that contributed to the tense relations between the two countries among them the Durand line dispute is major factor. Although China and other major actors like Qatar and Turkey mediate attempted to mediate between two sides, but recurring violence and unresolved political grievances continue to prevent stabilization of

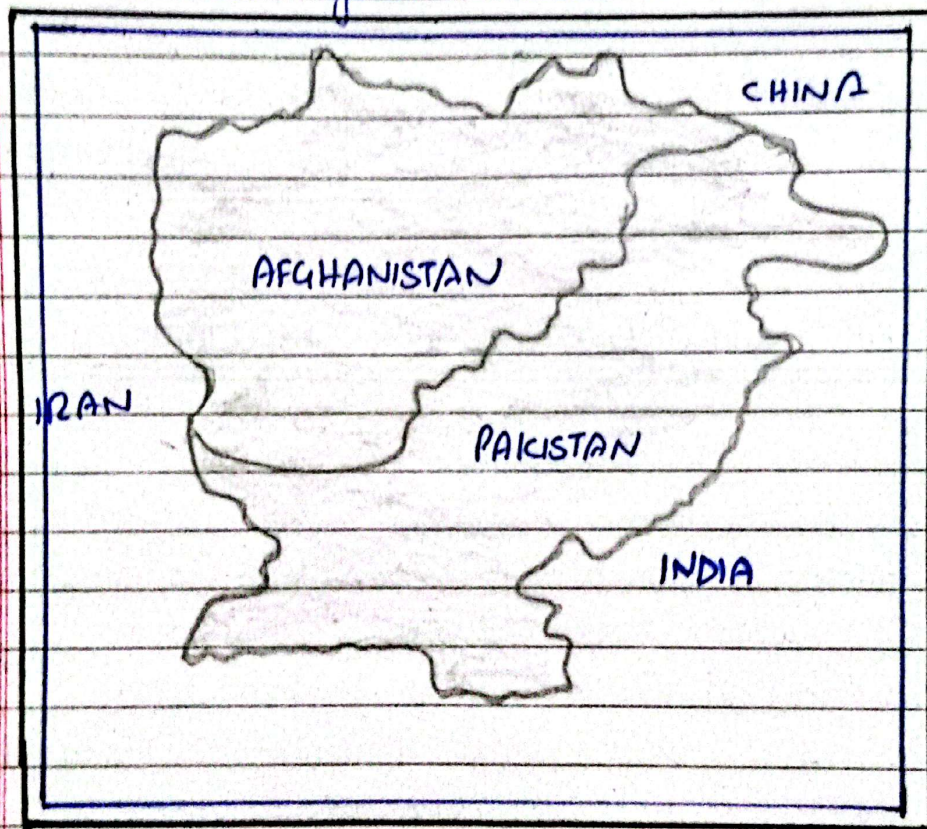
bilateral relations.

BRIEF BACKGROUND OF PAK - AFGHAN RELATIONS AFTER TALIBAN'S TAKEOVER in 2021

After US withdrawal and Taliban takeover in Afghanistan, the relations between the two countries remained tense and the cause was mistrust between the two. Major issue was Durand line and Pashtunistan issue. Since then many attacks were carried out from both sides. In December 2023, D.I. Khan attack happened. Pakistan blamed Afghanistan that their soil is used for terror attacks in Pakistan. Both countries share a long border of 2430 km which means that both countries should be good partners in trade, but the situation is vice versa due to unstable relations. Closure of borders frequently happens. In Jan 2024, Torkham border was closed and strict stance regarding visa policy was taken by Pakistan.

DATE: / /

In Dec 2024 and Oct 2025, Paktaka strike I and Paktaka strike II occurred respectively in Afghanistan. by Pakistan with a stance of targeting TTP camps. So, since taliban takeover the relations between the two ~~were~~ were not good overall.

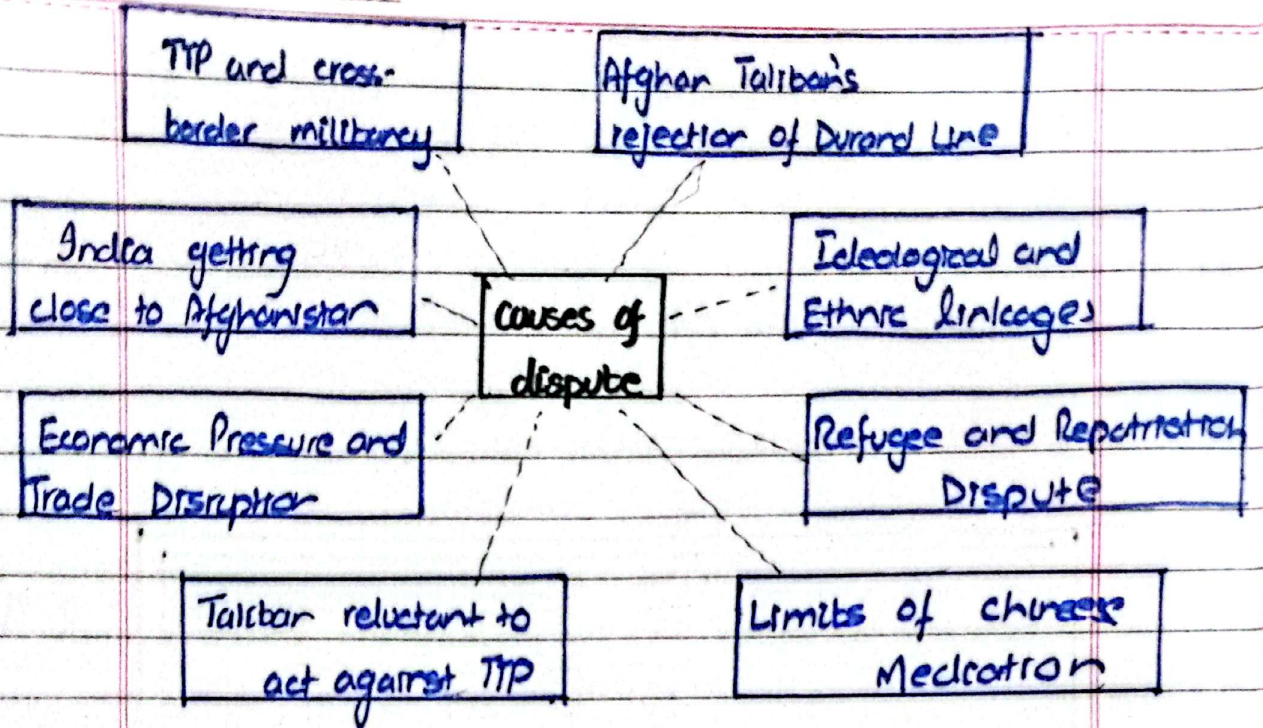


MAJOR FACTORS BEHIND THE TENSIONS

BETWEEN TWO COUNTRIES

There are numerous factors behind the tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

DATE: ___/___/___



• TTP and CROSS-BORDER MILITANCY

Since Taliban return to power, Pakistan has consistently accused the Afghan Taliban of providing safe haven to the TTP which has intensified cross-border militancy and strained bilateral ties. Pakistan's military has significantly increased Intelligence-based Operations (IBOs) along its western frontier against militant hideouts including ones alleged to be supported from across the borders killing numerous terrorists in KPK in Balochistan. In June 2024, Pakistan approved Operation Azm-e-Istehkam to reinforce its counter-terrorism drive against internal stability of Pakistan. Meanwhile, the TTP has

carried out series of deadly attacks inside Pakistan that have undermined security and political confidence including major assaults in districts such as Dera Ismail Khan and repeated targeting of Chinese workers and infrastructure associated with CPEC such as an attack on Chinese workers in Besham Tehsil, Shangla District of KP on 26 March 2024 killing 5 Chinese workers according to Dawn. Recently in Oct 2025 Pakistan II strikes were carried out by Pakistan in Afghanistan targeting TTP hideouts.

• AFGHAN TALKS REJECTION OF DURAND LINE AS

BORDER

Durand line was declared as a border in 1893 agreement and after the creation of Pakistan Durand line was a border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. But, Afghanistan maintains that 1893 agreement was colonial imposition and argues it is no longer valid as the British Indian Empire, the other signatory, ceased to exist in 1947. whereas Pakistan invokes the international law principle of *uti possidetis juris* to argue that inherited colonial borders remain legitimate.

The porous border region has become a safe haven for militant groups including TTP. To curb militancy Pakistan has been constructing border barrier along the line since 2017. This effort has been met with strong opposition from Afghan authorities leading to heightened hostilities and diplomatic standoffs.

- IDEOLOGICAL AND ETHNIC TIES LEADING TO CROSS-BORDER MILITANCY

Ideological and ethnic linkages intensify Pak-Afghan tensions as the Afghan Taliban share Pashtun tribal ties and ideological affinities with TTP. This affinity led to Pashtunistan issue and use of Afghan soil for terrorism in Pakistan including cross-border operations in KPK and Balochistan. Pakistan accuses Kabul of not acting against TTP due to these bonds which undermines border control and repeatedly trigger skirmishes along the Durand line.

- REFUGEES AND REPATRIATION DISPUTE LEADING TO BILATERAL TENSIONS

DATE: ___/___/___

According to UNHCR - The UN Refugee Agency at the beginning of 2025 there were some 1.6 million registered Afghan Refugees in Pakistan holding PoR cards (Proof of registration) with a total of 2.4 million refugees in Pakistan. According to Dawn, though many Afghan refugees were returned back in 2025, still there are about 2 million still living in Pakistan according to latest statistics released by UN Refugee Agency. UNHCR data shows that in November alone 171,055 Afghan returned with 37,899 deported through Chaman, Torkham and Barabaka Border and 31,500 Afghan PoR holder were sent back also. This heightened Pak-Afghan border tension in November.

• INDIA MAKING CLOSE TIES WITH AFGHANISTAN

Due to strained relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan, India is making close ties with Afghanistan. India, the rival of Pakistan since its inception is taking advantage of tense relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan. India upgraded its technical mission in Kabul to a full-fledged embassy in 2025 and expanded development projects such as infrastructure, healthcare and mining cooperation.

India's historical support for major projects like Afghan-India Friendship Dam (Salma Dam) in Herat province and recent economic initiative in Afghan provinces are seen by Pakistan as part of New Delhi increasing influence in Afghanistan as attempt to iron which adds to mistrust amid Pak-Afghan border tensions.

• ECONOMIC PRESSURE AND TRADE DISRUPTION

LEADING TO BORDER TENSIONS

Economic Pressure has increasingly shaped Pakistan-Afghanistan relations with border closures and visa-tightening frequently disrupting trade. Pakistan introduced one Document Regime (ODR) enforcing legal passports and visas for border crossing, a shift from older, lenient rules, in which TAD Temporary Admission Document which were used to be issued to cargo drivers for border crossing. New visa policy sparked protests on both sides because it led to trade suspension.

The Torkham crossing has been repeatedly been shut down for extended period due to security tensions. Pakistan has also closed Ghulam Ichar crossing

at times, and strict visa policy further slowed the movement of goods. Closure of borders pose loss of 100,000 dollars per day to both countries, thus creating economic pressure and financial losses. This economic mistrust becomes entangled with security concerns.

• TALIBAN RELUCTANT TO ACT AGAINST TTP

Pakistan argues that Taliban have been reluctant to decisively act against TTP contributing to bilateral tensions. The UN Security Council report ^{noted} that TTP has maintained presence in Afghanistan with financial and logistical support which Pakistan views as linked to the Afghan Taliban's historical and ideological ties with the group - Pakistan argues that this support has helped increase terror attacks in Pakistan.

• ROLE OF CHINA AS MEDIATOR AND

LIMITS OF CHINESE MEDIATION

China has emerged as a key external mediator between Pakistan and Afghanistan urging restraint and dialogue after recent border escalations. Beijing's

Interest stems mainly from protecting CPEC, Chinese nationals and preventing militant spillover into Xinjiang.

Although China has facilitated talks and supported ceasefire, its influence remains limited because it avoids taking sides in sovereignty disputes. Thus China's role is more as facilitator than mediator.

WAY FORWARDS TO IMPROVE PAK.

AFGHAN RELATIONS

• ENHANCED SECURITY COOPERATION TO

ADDRESS CROSS-BORDER TERRORISM

Both countries need structured counter-terror cooperation to address cross-border militancy, including intelligence sharing, verification procedures and coordination cells at major crossing.

A joint monitoring framework can help distinguish between militant and civilians, reduce blame-shifting and build confidence over time. Such cooperation would also deter groups seeking to exploit tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

• REGULAR AND INSTITUTIONALIZED DIPLOMATIC

ENGAGEMENT TO PREVENT CRISES

Relations cannot rely on corridors based communication alone. Regular political and security dialogues - ideally at foreign minister and military levels are essential to address grievances before they escalate. Trilateral engagement with trusted partners such as China, Qatar and Turkey can provide continuity and provide neutral space for negotiations.

• TRADE NORMALISATION AND ECONOMIC

INTERDEPENDENCE AS STABILISING TOOL

Sustained economic interdependence can moderate political tensions, keeping Torkham and Urdum ^{Khan} crossing open, easing visa formalities, and ensuring uninterrupted movement of goods would support border livelihoods and regional stability. Expanding transit trade and gradually integrating Afghanistan with border connectivity networks could create shared economic stakes in peace and stability.

RESPONSIBLE PUBLIC NARRATIVES TO REDUCE

HOSTILITY AND BUILD TRUST

Inflammatory rhetoric on either side fuels public anger and narrows diplomatic space. Responsible statements by political leaders, moderate media discourse and people-to-people linkages can gradually soften perceptions. Encouraging academic exchanges and cultural ties would shift the relationship from confrontation toward cooperative coexistence.

HUMANITARIAN AND REFUGEE MANAGEMENT

BASED ON PREDICTABLE POLICY FRAMEWORK

Refugee management must balance Pakistan's security concerns with humanitarian responsibilities. A predictable policy framework coordinated with UN agency and ICAH can reduce friction and prevent refugee flow from becoming politicized. Joint negotiation and voluntary repatriation mechanisms would help protect genuine refugees while addressing security sensitivities.

CONCLUSION:

• RESOLVING THE DURAND LINE ISSUE

THROUGH LEGAL RECOGNITION AND DIPLOMATIC

PRUDENCE.

The Durand line issue can be managed by recognising its legal validity under international law including principles like *uti possidetis juris*, Vienna convention clauses and historic agreement between British and Afghanistan. Pakistan may avoid using the term "Durand Line" in public discourse and educational material to reduce political sensitivities while maintaining it in official documents for historical accuracy. Simultaneously, joint border management, cooperation at checkpoints and adherence to UNSC resolutions can ensure stability and practical enforcement, building trust with Afghanistan without reopening historical disputes.

CONCLUSION:

In the nutshell, Pak-Afghan tensions stem from cross-border militancy, ethnic and ideological linkages, the Durand line dispute, refugee issue and trade disruption. While China's mediation has helped maintain dialogue, lasting stability requires joint counter-terrorism, regular diplomacy, trade normalisation,

DATE: ___/___/___

humanitarian cooperation, effective border management and responsible public narrative. Addressing these factors offers the best path toward reducing mistrust and building sustainable peace.
