

**THE PASHTUN FACTOR IN AFGHANISTAN-PAKISTAN RELATIONS****Otabek Mamasoliev**Email: [mamasoliyevotabek29@gmail.com](mailto:mamasoliyevotabek29@gmail.com)

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**Abstract:** This article analyzes the historical formation of the Pashtun factor in relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan, its impact on state security, and its consequences. The study examines the process from the demarcation of the Durand Line to the cross-border demographic weight of the Pashtuns, the activities of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Afghan Taliban, the dynamics of the Pashtun diaspora, and Pakistan's policies within the framework of its strategic depth doctrine. The Taliban's rise to power in Afghanistan in 2021 and its impact on regional stability are analyzed separately. The article also discusses legitimization discourses based on Article 51 of the UN Charter and international counter-terrorism resolutions, and proposes an integrated model of political, legal, and economic approaches. The analysis shows that the Pashtun issue cannot be resolved through military measures alone; rather, reducing economic inequality, recognizing cultural rights, and developing cross-border cooperation are essential directions.

**Keywords:** Pashtuns; Afghanistan; Pakistan; Durand Line; TTP; Taliban; Pashtunistan; diaspora; strategic depth; security; independence; autonomy

**Introduction**

The Pashtun issue is one of the most complex and enduring problems of South Asia, exerting a profound influence not only on domestic politics but also on the foreign policy courses of Afghanistan and Pakistan. With a population of 40–50 million spread across the world, Pashtuns are divided between two states: 25–30 million in Pakistan and 12–15 million in Afghanistan. Their aspirations for autonomy or independence, as well as the geopolitical significance of Pashtun-inhabited territories, have placed the Pashtun factor at the center of the foreign policy agendas of both states.

For Pakistan, the Pashtun issue is viewed primarily as a matter of national security. The long-term conflict with Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and other armed groups has shaped Islamabad's foreign and security policy, particularly its approach toward developments in Afghanistan. These operations are often justified as counter-terrorism measures, but they also reflect broader concerns about preventing the emergence of an independent political entity in Pashtun territory.

Afghanistan, for its part, employs a dual approach. On one hand, Kabul views its Pashtun people as the foundation for building statehood and national identity. On the other hand, the Afghan government views its co-ethnics in Pakistan as a potential lever through which it seeks to expand its regional influence. Both states are in agreement in assessing the Pashtun issue as a decisive factor shaping their regional strategies and foreign policy priorities.

The purpose of this research is to analyze how the Pashtun factor has influenced the foreign policies of Afghanistan and Pakistan, with particular attention paid to the intersection of domestic security concerns and regional strategic calculations. By examining historical developments, policy measures, and geopolitical contexts, this research aims to develop a deeper understanding of how the Pashtun issue functions as a source of conflict and a driver of foreign policy in South Asia.

## Methodology

The research employs historical-analytical, comparative political, and geopolitical methods. International legal documents, policy statements, academic research, and conclusions of regional experts have been used as the source base. Demographic data are based on reports from Minority Rights Group International, UNHCR, and regional research centers.

The total number of Pashtuns in South Asia and Central Asia amounts to 40–50 million people. They reside primarily in the northwestern provinces of Pakistan — Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the tribal areas (FATA, now part of KPK), and Balochistan — as well as in much of Afghanistan, particularly its southern and eastern provinces. This demographic weight directly influences not only the domestic politics of both states, but also the broader regional ethno-political dynamics.

In analyzing the role of Pashtuns in the socio-political life of Pakistan and Afghanistan, it is first necessary to examine the historical and political conditions that shaped the region. When the Durand Line was demarcated in 1893 and the border between British India and the Afghan Emirate was established, the territory inhabited by Pashtun tribes was artificially divided into two parts. When independent Pakistan was established in 1947 and inherited this border, Afghanistan refused to recognize it, which created the foundation for a long-term dispute between the two states.

## Results and Discussion

### *The Durand Line and the Pashtunistan Issue*

Correctly assessing the historical and political significance of the Durand Line is of great importance for understanding relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan. As Professor Barnett Rubin has emphasized in his research: "The Durand Line is not merely a border dispute, but a fundamental political problem that calls into question the mutual legitimacy of the two states." [1] This border issue gave rise to the idea of Pashtunistan and generated demands for the unification of Pashtuns in a single state.

After Pakistan's independence, the Afghan government actively promoted the concept of Pashtunistan, which caused diplomatic tension between the two neighbors. Afghanistan was the only state to vote against Pakistan's admission to the UN in 1947, which clearly demonstrated its principled position on the Pashtun issue. As historian Aqil Shah has noted: "The Pashtunistan issue became an inseparable part of Afghan national consciousness, even at times when practical diplomacy later pushed it to the background." [2]

### **Pakistan's Strategic Depth Doctrine**

The strategic depth doctrine, developed by Pakistan's military and political elite, became the key concept defining the country's foreign policy approach toward Afghanistan. In essence, this doctrine holds that Pakistan seeks to establish a friendly or dependent regime in Afghanistan in order to secure the possibility of strategic retreat in a potential confrontation with India.

As security researcher Ayesha Siddiqa demonstrates in her analysis: "The strategic depth doctrine is not merely a military prescription, but also a psychological and political condition arising from Pakistan's geopolitical vulnerability." [3] In this context, Pashtun tribal structures, and in particular the Taliban movement in Afghanistan, were viewed as instruments in Islamabad's regional strategy — which further complicated relations between the two states.

Numerous pieces of evidence exist regarding the support provided by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) to armed groups in Afghanistan, a situation that has been repeatedly

criticized by Kabul and the international community. As American analyst Bruce Riedel has written: "Pakistan simultaneously became a partner in the US counter-terrorism effort and a sponsor of forces that undermined it." [4]

### **TTP and Cross-Border Security Threats**

Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), founded in 2007, became firmly entrenched in Pashtun tribal territories and emerged as a serious internal security threat to the Pakistani state. The TTP waged armed struggle not only against the Pakistani government but also against international coalition forces. Importantly, although the TTP has ideological affinities with the Taliban in Afghanistan, they have remained separate organizations.

The return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan in 2021 further intensified TTP activity. As regional security analyst Zahid Hussain has noted: "The Afghan Taliban victory served as a powerful psychological boost for the TTP and introduced a new layer of political complexity into Pakistan-Afghanistan relations." [5] Kabul, meanwhile, remained under suspicion of harboring TTP leadership and seeking to use them as a tool against Pakistan.

In 2014, the Pakistani army launched the North Waziristan operation — one of the largest military campaigns aimed at bringing Pashtun tribal territories under control. However, as researchers have noted, military measures alone did not resolve the problem: large numbers of civilians were forced to flee, and terrorist activity was only temporarily suppressed.

### **Afghanistan 2021: A New Geopolitical Environment**

The withdrawal of US troops in August 2021 and the Taliban's capture of Kabul fundamentally transformed the regional geopolitical landscape. This event necessitated a re-examination of the Pashtun factor in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations within a new context. Initially, Pakistan welcomed the Taliban's victory, but the rapid intensification of TTP activity soon strained relations.

The Taliban government in Kabul refused to recognize the Durand Line, which renewed diplomatic tension between the two states. Between 2022 and 2024, the number of border incidents in Pashtun tribal territories increased sharply. As regional analyst Michael Kugelman has noted: "The Taliban is either unwilling or unable to rein in the TTP against Pakistan, which represents the worst-case scenario for Islamabad." [6]

In 2023, the Pakistani government announced a campaign to deport undocumented migrants, as a result of which hundreds of thousands of Afghans — the majority of them Pashtuns — were expelled from the country. This decision triggered a humanitarian crisis and further aggravated relations between the two states.

### **International Law and Legitimization Discourses**

From the perspective of international law, Pakistan's military operations inside Afghanistan and air strikes against TTP positions require complex legal assessments. Under Article 2(4) of the UN Charter, all states are obligated to refrain from the use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of another state.

Pakistan, however, justifies its actions on the basis of Article 51 of the UN Charter — the right to self-defense — and UN Security Council counter-terrorism resolutions No. 1373 and No. 2249. The Pakistani government classifies the TTP and other armed groups as direct threats to national security and considers measures to neutralize them as legitimate acts of self-defense. As a result, Pakistan's operations have become a subject of international legal assessment, being

interpreted on one hand as lawful counter-terrorism efforts and criticized on the other as violations of the principles of sovereignty.

### **The Pashtun Diaspora and Transnational Influence**

The Pashtun diaspora — located primarily in Western Europe, North America, and the Middle East — is becoming an increasingly important factor in addressing the Pashtun issue. The diaspora representatives' use of political lobbying, cultural resources, and communication networks has amplified their influence, which in turn is directly affecting the strategies of Pashtun movements within Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) — a civil movement that emerged in Pakistan in 2018 — brought issues of Pashtun rights, military operations, and enforced disappearances to the center of the international stage. As PTM leader Manzoor Pashteen has declared: "We have not taken up arms, but we will not retreat from demanding our rights either." [7] This movement has gained wide support both within Pakistan and among diaspora communities.

### **The Economic Factor and Resource Geopolitics**

The economic interdependence between Pakistan and Afghanistan is also an important factor shaping the Pashtun issue. The trade and economic relations between the two states are built upon routes and markets that pass through Pashtun tribal territories. Afghanistan remains a key state on Pakistan's route of access to Central Asian markets.

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), part of China's Belt and Road Initiative, passes through Pashtun territories and has created new geopolitical and economic dynamics. As economic analyst Andrew Small has noted: "CPEC is generating both economic incentives for resolving the Pashtun issue and new political complexities." [8]

### **Pathways to Resolution: An Integrated Model**

The analysis shows that the Pashtun issue cannot be resolved through military measures alone. Historical experience — particularly Pakistan's operations in the Tribal Areas and the twenty-year war in Afghanistan — has clearly demonstrated the limited effectiveness of military application. As an alternative approach, the following integrated model is proposed.

***In the political-legal direction:*** it is necessary to initiate the process of reviewing and formally recognizing the Durand Line on the basis of international legal norms, to more broadly involve Pashtun tribal communities in state governance, and to address issues of cultural rights and education in the mother tongue. ***In the economic direction:*** it is essential to implement economic development programs in Pashtun territories, to develop infrastructure in border regions, and to strengthen trade and economic integration. ***In the security direction:*** a combined military-diplomatic approach toward the TTP, intelligence cooperation with Afghanistan, and the involvement of tribal elders in the process of neutralizing armed groups are recommended.

### **Conclusion**

The Pashtun issue remains a decisive geopolitical factor in relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The artificial border of the Durand Line, the strategic depth doctrine, TTP activity, and the political changes of 2021 are making these relations increasingly complex. Both states are attempting to manage the Pashtun issue within the framework of their respective regional strategies, but history has proven that relying solely on a military approach is ineffective.

This research shows that a stable and long-term solution can be achieved through reducing economic inequality, recognizing cultural rights, and developing cross-border cooperation. The growing political influence of the Pashtun diaspora and the emergence of civil movements such as the PTM are creating new diplomatic opportunities. The integrated model necessary for regional stability requires the application of political, legal, and economic approaches in close and organic interconnection with one another.

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