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Table of Contents

TENSIONS AT THE BORDER BETWEEN PAKISTAN AND AFGHANISTAN: AN ANALYSIS.....	4
INTRODUCTION	5
THE PASHTUNISTAN ISSUE.....	6
THE PAKISTANI SEARCH FOR STRATEGIC DEPTH	8
PAKISTAN’S HARMFUL SUPPORT OF THE TALIBAN	10
PAKISTAN-TALIBAN TIES AND THE FUTURE INSTABILITY OF PASHTUNISTAN	12
ANALYSING ETHNIC MINORITIES AND IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY IRAN	15
INTRODUCTION	16
DISCOVERING IRANIAN ETHNIC MINORITIES	17
<i>Azerbaijanis</i>	17
<i>Kurds</i>	19
<i>Arabs</i>	21
<i>Baluch</i>	23
<i>Turkmen</i>	23
<i>Qashqai</i>	24
<i>Lurs</i>	24
<i>Armenians</i>	25
<i>Mazandarani People (also called Mazani or Tabari)</i>	26
<i>Gilaks: (or Gils)</i>	27
<i>Talyshis</i>	27
<i>Tat</i>	27
<i>Assyrian/Chaldean</i>	28
<i>Dom</i>	29
RELIGIOUS MINORITIES	30
CONCLUSION	31
ANALISI DELLE RELAZIONI BILATERALI TRA AFGHANISTAN E TURKMENISTAN	33
INTRODUZIONE	33
STORIA DELLE RELAZIONI BILATERALI	34
I RAPPORTI ECONOMICI TRA AFGHANISTAN E TURKMENISTAN.....	38
<i>La cooperazione in ambito energetico</i>	38
TENSIONI LUNGO IL CONFINE, PROBLEMI DI SICUREZZA E LA SITUAZIONE DEI TURKMENI AFGHANI: L’ATTITUDINE DI AŞGABAT.....	40
CONCLUSIONI	42
GEOPOLITICS OF THE NORTH CAUCASUS: AN ANALYSIS OF LOCAL ETHNIC MINORITIES AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES	44
INTRODUCTION	45

THE FORUM OF THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLE AND THE ROLE OF NORTH CAUCASIAN ETHNIC MINORITIES 48
CONCLUSION 51

Tensions at the Border Between Pakistan and Afghanistan: An Analysis

Gabriele Massano*

Abstract in English

The return of the Taliban to Kabul in August 2021 has been repeatedly described as a strategic victory for the Pakistani government. However, the issue is much more complex and it may cause harmful implications for the domestic stability of Pakistan in the medium term. Actually, today, as during the first Taliban emirate, the movement of Quranic students is progressively proving to be a partial and highly problematic ally for Islamabad. The numerous terrorist attacks currently perpetrated in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan by the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the growing tensions at the disputed border, and the significant outflows of foreign currency are just some of the latest warning signs. The long-standing tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan have their roots in the redefining process of the common frontier promoted by the British Crown during the final stages of the “Great Game”. The current border, better known as the Durand Line, disrupted the territorial continuity of the Pashtun ethnic fabric, thereby undermining the already fragile regional balances and generating multiple disputes regarding the demarcation between the two countries. In order to mitigate the negative effects of this controversy on the stability of its domestic front, Pakistan has historically made a significant contribution to the radicalisation of the Afghan political scenario, believing that a shared extremist religious identity could have effectively suppressed the ethnic claims of the Pashtun community. However, this Pakistani strategy, which has been translated into constant support to the rise of the Taliban movement in Afghanistan, has fatally mistaken as decisive what instead in human affairs has relatively less importance, i.e. ideology. The effects of this geopolitical misstep, therefore, are having an impact on Pakistan's trajectory today, with the risk of opening up a new season of violence across the Durand Line.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Pakistan, Taliban, security, border crisis, geopolitics

Abstract in Italiano

Il ritorno dei talebani a Kabul nell'Agosto del 2021 è stato più volte descritto come una vittoria strategica del governo pakistano. La questione, però, è molto più complessa e nel medio periodo potrebbe assumere connotazioni nefaste per la stabilità interna del Pakistan. Oggi, come negli anni del primo emirato talebano, infatti, il movimento degli studenti coranici si sta progressivamente dimostrando un alleato parziale ed assai problematico per Islamabad. Gli innumerevoli attentati terroristici perpetrati attualmente nei territori del Khyber Pakhtunkhwa e del Belucistan per mano del Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), le crescenti tensioni alla frontiera contesa e le enormi emorragie di liquidità estera, rappresentano soltanto alcuni degli ultimi campanelli di allarme. Le tensioni di lungo periodo tra Afghanistan e Pakistan traggono origine dal processo di ridefinizione della frontiera comune promosso dalla Corona britannica durante le ultime fasi del “Grande Gioco”. Il confine attuale, la cosiddetta Linea Durand, ha avuto l'effetto di spezzare la continuità territoriale del tessuto etnico pashtun, sovvertendo i già fragili equilibri regionali e generando molteplici contrasti in merito alla demarcazione fra i due Paesi. Per attutire gli effetti negativi di questa controversia

sulla stabilità del proprio fronte interno, il Pakistan ha storicamente fornito un contributo rilevante alla radicalizzazione dello scenario politico afgano, nella convinzione che una comune identità religiosa oltranzista avrebbe potuto sopire le rivendicazioni etniche della comunità pashtun. La tattica pakistana, tradottasi in un costante sostegno all'ascesa del movimento dei talebani in Afghanistan, ha però fatalmente scambiato per decisivo ciò che invece assume un peso relativo nelle vicende umane: l'ideologia. Gli effetti di questa sgrammaticatura geopolitica incidono oggi sulla traiettoria del Pakistan e rischiano di aprire ad una nuova stagione di violenze a cavallo della Linea Durand.

Parole chiave: Afghanistan, Pakistan, talebani, sicurezza, crisi delle frontiere, geopolitica.

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Introduction

The year 2023 is drawing to an end as one of the bloodiest periods in the contemporary history of Pakistan. For almost a decade, the Islamabad government has apparently proven to be successful in stemming the spiral of violence, which was dragging its northwestern provinces into the abyss. In 2014, as a matter of fact, Pakistani security forces conducted a successful large-scale military campaign to suppress numerous guerrilla hotspots flourished in the tribal areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, managing to relegate the separatist threat into the mountains of neighbouring Afghanistan.

The primary objective of the operation was the neutralisation of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the so-called “Pakistani Taliban movement,” a heterogeneous organisation under whose umbrella a galaxy of fundamentalist groups had been coalesced along the Pashtun belt adjacent to the Afghan border. The latest takeover of Kabul by their allies and the implementation of a new centralised structure within the faction, however, have recently meant a decisive turning point for the TTP.¹ Since August 2021, in fact, the group has resurged with

¹ A. Sayed & T. Hamming, «The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan After the Taliban's Afghanistan Takeover», CTC Sentinel (Combating Terrorism Center-West Point), vol.16, issue 5, May 2023.

great momentum in carrying out terrorist operations on Pakistani soil, attempting to reassert at the local level the political agenda and the successes of the movement originally founded by mullah Omar.

This development may appear logical to an external observer, except for the fact that the Islamabad government, now harmed by its own tactical decisions, has been the main supporter of the Taliban for decades despite the numerous repercussions on its internal stability. Is this irony of fate or a symptom of a much deeper-rooted disease?

Pakistan and Afghanistan are lands remote and culturally alien to us, which are impossible to analyse through Western lenses. Their peculiarity represents a luxury that has always been forgotten by our media's narrative, where these contexts are often categorically labelled as "black" or "white," thus overlooking the dominance of their distinctive shades of grey.

Not for nothing, allegedly influenced by the enthusiasm circulating in the corridors of the deep Pakistani state following the return of the Taliban to Kabul, a significant portion of international headlines declared Pakistan's strategic victory in August 2021, thereby complying with the Indo-centric paranoia of a country completely bent to the will of the army. By the way, it is worth to remember how the same sense of euphoria pervaded Washington's secret services back in February 1989, when the last Soviet tank crossed the Oxus River to escape from the rage of the mujahideen, at that time depicted by the Western press as brave "freedom fighters".² At the foot of the Hindu Kush, indeed, in a land inhabited by hospitable populations but strongly hostile to foreign interference, where ideologies always succumb under the overwhelming weight of ethnicities, the overseas triumphant that assumes imperialistic postures or behaves dazzled by propaganda often ends up getting burned. This is a lesson learned not only by the Americans, but also by the British and Russians long before them. One that the military intelligence agencies of Islamabad still cynically choose to overlook today.

The Pashtunistan issue

The tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan have their roots in the redefining process of the common frontier promoted by the British Crown at the end of the nineteenth century, within the framework of its hegemonic competition with the Russian Empire, better known

² A. T. Sheikh, «Not the Whole Truth: Soviet and Western Media Coverage of the Afghan Conflict», *Strategic Studies* (Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad), vol.13, no.3, Spring 1990, pp. 35-63.

as the “Great Game”. In this geopolitical context, the territory roughly corresponding to present-day Afghanistan, then under the rule of the new-born Durrani Empire, became the major catalyst for colonial ambitions in the Central Asian region, due to its strategic position across a fault line between the two rival spheres of influence.

Driven by the need to defend its colonial possessions in the Indian subcontinent from the northern advance of Russian forces, the British Crown, between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, thus initiated a series of conflicts to gain control of the Durrani monarchy. Afghanistan, even then, proved to be a territory relatively easy to conquer but impossible to tightly control through the direct imposition of foreign rule. The British, therefore, opted for a diplomatic solution, imposing the acceptance of new political borders on the Pashtun dynastic elite, in order to create an actual buffer zone between the British Raj and the Russian Empire.

The demarcation of the northern Afghan border essentially aimed to halt the Russian advance beyond the Oxus River and, therefore, faced no significant issues in its implementation phase, as it equally served the strategic interests of both London and Kabul. Conversely, the delineation of the southern border was highly contentious and caused an irreparable wound in the heart of the region, laying the groundwork for the conflicts that still afflict the area today.

From a British perspective, the reshaping of the southern border of the Kingdom of Afghanistan, later renamed as Durand Line, was intended to serve two crucial aims: on the one hand, to contain the periodic incursions of Afghan tribes into the plains of the Indus, thereby contributing to the stability of valuable colonial territories such as the Punjab; on the other hand, to weaken the demographic weight of the Pashtuns compared to other Afghan ethnic groups, thus undermining any future revanchism and compromising the growing Durrani state-building project based on the major ethnic element.

Therefore, the new drawing of the frontier splitted the geographic and cultural heart of the homeland of the largest Afghan ethnic group (Pashtunistan), separating with force entire tribes and assigning a substantial portion of them to the authority of the British Raj, especially those gravitating around the cities of Quetta and Peshawar. Consequently, since then, while the other borders were at least recognised as a fact by the indigenous population, that mountainous frontier line remained so porous and virtual that no subsequent Afghan government, regardless of ideological affiliation, had the will to acknowledge its authority. Strongly supported in this effort by the irredentism of cross-border Pashtun tribes.

The Pakistani search for strategic depth

From the western fringes of the Raj, in the mid-twentieth century emerged the independent state of Pakistan, which inherited from its colonial ancestor a disputed frontier with Kabul, but, at the same time, failed to emulate its Anglo-Saxon pragmatism. Assembled solely on the basis of a common religious confession, within which deeply fragmented ethno-linguistic identities attempted imperfect dissolution, the Pakistani mosaic was immediately overwhelmed by the paranoia of being dismembered by its neighbours. At the top of Islamabad's list of existential threats New Delhi was pinned, the sworn enemy the new-born Muslim state feared being incorporated into once again. Moreover, the insidious hegemonic aspirations of India were perceived by Pakistan as capable of extending even into the Afghan territory, based on the historical relationship that had previously tied Kabul to the British Raj.

Once understood the renewed regional scenario, on its side Afghanistan persisted in refusing to acknowledge the legitimacy of the Durand Line, partly in response to the nationalist sentiments of its domestic Pashtun population and partly to secure transit advantages from the newly formed Pakistan, which, instead, could boast a commercial outlet to the sea. Islamabad, on the other hand, never attempted to bow to Kabul's pressures, as the relinquishment of its northwestern territories would have easily triggered a fatal process of wider fragmentation. As a result, relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan deteriorated on several occasions between the 1950s and 1970s, eventually becoming entwined in the broader dynamics of the Cold War, when the entry of the Red Army into Kabul marked a pivotal turning point in the issue.

Actually, for quite a long time, Pakistani secret services were seeking for substantial foreign financing to develop their military capabilities and pursue Islamabad's geopolitical imperatives, which, with regard to the Afghan border, were identified in the crucial need to obtain a greater strategic depth. Starting from the premise that the peculiar narrow and elongated shape of its territory would have exposed it to a pincer attack directed at the core of the nation, Pakistan thereby saw in the possibility of establishing a client government in Kabul the effective solution for two vital concerns: the instability of its northern-western borders and the lack of a logistical background to fight India in Kashmir.³ Concretely, the Pakistani

³ A. Pande, «Explaining Pakistan's Foreign Policy», Routledge, New York, 2011, pp. 59-87.

Grand strategy was implemented through the dissemination of fundamentalist religious ideologies across the trans-border Pashtun provinces and through the logistic-military support to dissident Islamist groups in Afghanistan.

These decisions were mainly based on the assumption that a shared Islamic identity would have eventually downplayed the different ethnic affiliations, thus mitigating the Pakistani domestic irredentism and, consequently, projecting Islamabad's geopolitical influence onto Kabul. When the U.S. intelligence services therefore contracted General Zia-ul-Haq for the on-ground management of a substantial flow of weapons and money—tools intended to finance the training of anti-Soviet guerrilla fighters, the mujahideen, on the remote highlands of Pakistan—the Punjabi dictator's eyes filled with joy, having finally secured the funds needed to pursue more assertively the geopolitical imperatives associated with the Afghan border.

The project masterminded by the military apparatus of Islamabad initially focused on the selective support of exclusively Afghan Islamist factions of Pashtun ethnicity, making them the driving force behind the jihadist anti-Soviet insurgency in Kabul. This was made in the over-ambitious hope that, once in power, they would have immediately considered Pakistan's strategic priorities, owing to the solid ideological and patronage ties woven together over the time. However, in the aftermath of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, with the absence of a common enemy, the mujahideen front quickly disintegrated leading to a civil war, where localism and opportunism prevailed over any other "ism" (Islamism, nationalism, and socialism).

Suddenly lacking of reliable allies on the ground, Pakistani intelligence services sought to support the rise of another fundamentalist organisation composed only by Pashtuns, theoretically capable of representing Islamabad's geopolitical interests and meanwhile able to counter the prominence of the Tajik guerrilla forces, considered too close to the interests of India and Iran instead. The turning point for Pakistan came in the mid-1990s, when the Taliban movement quickly emerged on the Afghan political scene.



Figure 1 An ethnolinguistic map showing different language and cultural groups across Afghanistan and Pakistan. Source: The Choices Program, Brown University, www.choices.edu.

Pakistan's harmful support of the Taliban

Originating as a spontaneous mobilisation of former mujahideen gathered in the southern Afghan province of Kandahar, the Taliban movement quickly caught the attention of Pakistani officials: on the one hand, due to the exclusively clerical leadership of the organisation, and on the other hand, because of the distinctive social background of its younger followers. The war against the Soviets, in fact, had caused the exodus of millions of Afghans to neighbouring countries, especially Pakistan, where an entire generation of Pashtun youth had been galvanised by extremist messages provided by madrasas established within refugee camps managed by Pakistani political parties.⁴ Therefore, the sudden successes of these Quranic students and their religious ideals of well-known matrix convinced the intelligence services of Islamabad to provide them extensive economic and logistical support, which eventually proved decisive for their triumph over rival factions.

Despite the numerous efforts to finance and manage them, however, once they finally seized Kabul, the Taliban soon exhibited substantial decision-making autonomy and resisted the majority of manipulation attempts orchestrated by Pakistan. Contrary to the expectations of

⁴ A. Rashid, «Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia», Bloomsbury Publishing, London, 2001.

Islamabad's intelligence services, indeed, the Mullah Omar, following the pattern of previous Afghan rulers, refused to recognise the legitimacy of the Durand Line and did not accept to abandon historical claims on the tribal territories beyond the disputed border. On the contrary, he strongly encouraged Pashtun communities' irredentism and extended his influence over Pakistani fundamentalists south of the frontier. The shared Islamic identity, therefore, even though it was elevated as a constitutive element of the new regime, was still unable to transcend or replace the far more deeply rooted ethnic affiliation. As a result, it was not the Taliban to provide strategic depth to Pakistan, but rather Islamabad's government, misguided by the erroneous analyses of its intelligence services, the one who gave it to the movement of Quranic students instead.

Hence, following the Western military intervention in Afghanistan in 2001, there was a subsequent and rapid process of absorption of the Taliban militancy in the Pashtun tribal belt spanning from Baluchistan to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where the Afghan fundamentalist organisation managed to enjoy a secure background for reorganisation. From this merging among Taliban guerrillas, Al Qaeda operatives, and the Pakistani social fabric later emerged the embryos of new indigenous extremist groups, including the aforementioned Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). By providing an ideological cover to the irredentist sentiments of the local community, these new-born organisations established small independent tribal emirates in their respective territories. Thus, the fundamentalist backflow from Afghanistan in the early 2000s fuelled political instability in Pakistan and had extremely deleterious consequences for the country's civil society.

Nonetheless, the Pakistani military elite, once again obsessed with the possibility of India extending its influence over Kabul government, blindly persisted in repeating the old mistakes. During the two decades of NATO military intervention in Afghanistan, in fact, Pakistani intelligence services deliberately chose to play both sides: on one hand, collecting huge Western funds aimed at "fighting terrorism," and on the other, providing significant support and logistical aid to the Taliban resistance groups, contributing significantly to their surprising resurgence. Far from improving the situation, though, the further capture of Kabul by the Taliban has only worsened Islamabad's strategic quagmire. The recent shootings at the disputed border⁵, the outflows of foreign currency,⁶ and the terrorist attacks carried out by

⁵ «Main Afghanistan-Pakistan border crossing closed after guards exchange fire», Al Jazeera, 06/09/2023.

⁶ E. Najafizada & I. Dilawar, «Dollars Smuggled From Pakistan Provide Lifeline for the Taliban», Bloomberg, 06/02/2023.

Pashtun separatist groups (who now enjoy a safe haven in Afghanistan)⁷ are just the latest red flags. Actually, they are symptoms of a much deeper-rooted disease that has been continuously blurring the strategic framework of the Pakistani leadership for too many years now.

Pakistan-Taliban ties and the future instability of Pashtunistan

Were not the Pakistani intelligence services the ones who created Taliban, but without Islamabad's continuous support, the fundamentalist movement could not have survived for so long amid the several warring factions inside of Afghanistan. Pakista's blind obstinacy has its roots in a severe Indian-centric encirclement syndrome, in the existence of a highly disputed northwestern border and in the continuity of the Pashtun ethnic fabric that goes through it, and finally in the desire of gaining exclusive access to an energy corridor directly connected to Central Asia. These needs cannot be blamed on Islamabad: the Grand strategy represents whatever an international player needs to necessarily achieve, what it must pursue to avoid collapsing under external pressures or under the weight of its own structural inconsistencies. What has been highly debatable and detrimental, however, are the strategies devised by Pakistan's military apparatus to address these needs over time, as they often treated as decisive what in human affairs has always a relative weight: ideology.

In modern Afghanistan, the Pashtuns have been the dominant ethnic group since the first half of the eighteenth century and currently constitute approximately 40% of the country's total population. In part due to the legacy of British colonialism and partly due to the four decades of conflicts that have occurred in Kabul, an even larger number of Pashtuns reside today on the Pakistani side of the southern border, mainly concentrated in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the northern districts of Balochistan. In these areas, tribes often cross the Afghanistan-Pakistan border without proper documentation, proudly brandish their rifles, and harshly refuse to recognise the legitimacy of the Durand Line, thus displaying their emotional connection to ancient Pashtunistan. Although a significant part of this area has been outside of Kabul's jurisdiction for quite some time, indeed, Afghan Pashtuns still feel the pain of this amputation and meanwhile their relatives across the border proudly reject assimilation into the Pakistani community. Therefore, like any Afghan government, Taliban could never accept to relinquish this formidable leveraging tool over Islamabad. On the one hand, since it allows them to rally a significant portion of their Pashtun citizens and

⁷ M. Ahmed, «What's behind the Pakistani Taliban's insurgency?», Associated Press, 31/01/2023.

hold them tight to the heart of the nation. On the other hand, because the cyclical pressure on cross-border irredentism often serves as a powerful tool to reduce Pakistan's pervasive interference in Afghan affairs.

Aware of the unfavourable juncture, the Islamabad government is currently threatening the forced repatriation of nearly two million Afghan refugees to try to bring back the movement of Quranic students into its fold.⁸ Far from being a monolithic organisation, however, Taliban at the moment appear deeply divided on the degree of interference to grant to such requests, thus highlighting the various tribal and contentious elements coexisting within their power structure.

While it is undeniable that the Pakistani intelligence services still hold greater influence over the Taliban than any other international actor is capable of exercising today, during peacetime and in the absence of steady foreign funding, this situation is not destined to remain unchanged. Although any external actor ever succeeded in fully manipulating Afghan tribes, in fact, the Pakistani military leadership seems to have remained stuck in the 1980s, when a significant influx of weapons and money gave it the power to manage the course of the Afghan jihad. However, the Taliban, unlike the mujahideen guerrillas who fought against the Soviets, mostly grew up in refugee camps set up in Pakistani territory or were educated in local madrasas, where they forged strong ties with various Pakistani power groups, sharing with them a homeland and even some family relationships. This peculiarity allows the movement not to feel necessarily bound to a single Pakistani lobby but to enjoy privileged access, especially in the absence of the needs imposed by an ongoing military conflict, to numerous pressure groups that have emerged from the gradual erosion of the Pakistani state's power, eventually pitting them against each other to extend its influence over the neighbouring country.

Moreover, in order to balance Pakistani interference, the "historic" wing of the Kandahari Taliban is currently courting with extreme caution other regional actors (primarily China, Iran, India, Russia, and Turkey). Thus, giving credence to the ancient adage stating that, to rule Afghanistan steadily, it is advisable to convince Afghans not to be bound to any foreign power, while persuading those same foreigners to finance the state machinery and army of the country. Last but not least, the development of the Chabahar port in southeastern Iran,

⁸ Z. Rehman & C. Goldbaum, «Pakistan Orders More Than a Million Afghans Out of the Country», The New York Times, 08/10/2023.

cleverly funded by Indian investments, could soon end Pakistan's monopoly on sea transit trade to Afghanistan, thus depriving Islamabad of another leveraging tool over Kabul.⁹

Far from willing to reformulate Islamabad's tactical approach towards Afghanistan, however, Pakistani military leadership will likely prefer to fuel its domestic chaos to the point of paroxysm, then exploiting the classic threat of the nuclear weapons in the hands of jihadist groups to attract new foreign investments in a parasitic manner. This time, the most probable victim of the Pakistani trap will not be United States but rather China, which is increasingly engaging in Pakistan through significant urban-infrastructure projects aimed at bypassing the Strait of Malacca, which is the Beijing's energy jugular in the waters of the Indian Ocean, currently under the full control of the American rival.

In conclusion, being enslaved by the blurred vision of the military elite, the Islamabad government today appears trapped in a vicious circle of erroneous assumptions and sectarian violence, which, in the medium term, may easily lead to the complete detonation of its north-western borders. Unlike the past, though, this renewed instability in Beijing's backyard could prove extremely functional to U.S. hegemonic plans projected into the Indo-Pacific.

⁹ A. Law, «Chabahar port: India speeds up work on long-term contract details», The Hindu Business Line, 04/09/2023.