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THE DURAND LINE AND THE FENCE:

How are communities managing with cross-border lives?



AFGHANISTAN
ANALYSTS
NETWORK

Afghanistan Analysts Network

Regional Relations

April 2024

The Durand Line, which serves as the de facto border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, has never been officially recognised by any Kabul government. It cuts through the heart of Pashtun tribes, who share family ties, religion and traditions. For most of its existence, it made little practical difference to the lives of the people living on either side. However, Pakistan's decision in 2017 to fence the entire Line, a project which is now almost complete, has physically split communities. In this report, guest author Sabawoon Samim looks at what that has meant to the lives of those living on the Durand Line, exploring the damage done and some of the partial solutions found by locals, albeit at some cost and some risk.

INTRODUCTION



Map of Afghanistan in 1893, with modern boundaries overlayed in red as per the World Boundaries and Places layer, Environmental Systems Research Institute (ESRI).

Source: Antique layer from Afghanistan, Beloochistan, Etc., Hunt & Eaton, New York, 1893 and Modern overlay by Roger Helms for AAN, 2024

The agreement creating the 2,640-kilometre-long Durand Line was signed in 1893 between the Afghan king, Amir Abdul Rahman Khan and the British foreign secretary for India, Sir Henry Mortimer Durand (see agreement's [text](#)). Much has been written about how this agreement was reached, its legal status and how it affects the politics of the two countries. However, there is a dearth of information about how the fencing of the Line by Pakistan has affected

the local population socially, economically and culturally. This report, based on 16 in-depth interviews with Afghan nationals from the border provinces, tries to remedy that.¹ After providing a brief historical background, it delves into who the local communities are and the bonds between them. It examines the recent restrictions put in place along the Durand Line, particularly Pakistan's fence, and

¹ The interviewees came from Khost, Paktia, Nangrahar, Kunar and Kandahar provinces. A small number of interviewees lived and were interviewed in Kabul, while half of the families remained in their native provinces, and they themselves have been in touch with their communities. The interviewees were selected largely from districts where the Durand Line is drawn. Age-wise, all of them were above 30. The author, unfortunately, was unable to interview any women. Nor could he interview people on the Pakistani side of the Durand Line due to movement restrictions, but several interviewees had family members and relatives living on the other side. Moreover, the report is further enriched by the author's previous visits to the border areas and his random conversations with locals there.

how it has cut through tribes, villages, families and farms. Finally, it explores how locals are coping with losing the freedom of movement they used to enjoy. The report concludes with a brief overview of the current political dynamics between the two countries.

The map above was drawn in 1893. It demonstrates the problematic legacy of colonial-era cartography, with its claims to utmost precision, grounded in Westphalian notions of borders and territorial sovereignty, yet with limited actual accuracy. It seems to include as part of Afghanistan areas that had long ceased to be closely connected to the Kabul court, if indeed they ever had such a connection.²

BACKGROUND

For Afghans, particularly for ethnic Pashtuns, the Durand Line remains a disturbing issue.³ Many refuse to consider it a legitimate international border, arguing that Abdul Rahman Khan signed the agreement under duress and British pressure, believing it to be a treaty intended to identify respective spheres of influence and not to create an official boundary between two countries.⁴ Moreover, Afghans also question the agreement's validity once Britain had withdrawn from what became Pakistan in 1947. There is a widely held belief among Afghans that the agreement was only valid for 100 years, although the agreement makes no mention of this.

Leaving aside the legal and political explanations against or in favour of its validity, when it comes to day-to-day living, the Line is currently having deplorable effects

² For example, the 1893 map misrepresents Afghanistan's effective borders/sphere of influence, particularly in relation to Chitral and the Upper Indus Valley.

³ The Durand Line also cuts through Baluch communities living in southwestern Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran. Moreover, in its Nuristan/Chitral section, it separates groups such as the Nuristanis and the Kalash, who, at the time the agreement was signed, had close cultural and social ties. However, this report focuses solely on how it has affected Pashtuns.

⁴ Until the demarcation of the Durand Line, and in some respects even afterwards, the extension of Afghanistan's southeastern border was understood in Kabul more in terms of politico-economic relations with the Pashtun tribes inhabiting the area rather than territorial and administrative control (ie, tolls collected from traders – or, more rarely, tributes extracted from the tribes – and subsidies paid to the latter in exchange for their nominal allegiance and the military control of strategic passes). See Christine Noelle, 'State and Tribe in Nineteenth-Century Afghanistan', pp163-190.

on the life of the communities who straddle it. It was drawn across the heart of Pashtun tribal territory, arbitrarily placing members of families and tribes in different countries. From Afghanistan's Pashtun-dominated southern provinces of Helmand, Kandahar and Zabul through Paktika, Khost, Paktia and up to Nangrahar and Kunar, living on each side of the Line are almost exclusively the same people, separated by a boundary they had no hand in crafting and which many do not accept.⁵ More importantly, it is a boundary that has posed significant problems to their everyday lives, especially in the last few years.

The Line has been a key factor influencing relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan, often steering them towards hostility. The first quarrel dates back to 1947 when newly-created Pakistan was set to join the United Nations as an independent state and Afghanistan voted against its membership.⁶ However, long before the creation of Pakistan, the discussion over the future of the Tribal Agencies, the administrative units that include much of the territory on the other side of the Durand Line, had been going on in Pashtun political circles. Many on the Indian side of the Durand Line, as well as the Afghan government itself, reached out to Britain to settle this issue. Pashtun political leaders in British India, such as brothers Doctor Khan and Khan Abdul Ghafar Khan, developed the idea of an independent Pashtun state, Pashtunistan, for the Pashtuns of the other side. These efforts, though, did not yield results and the Tribal Agencies, together with other areas inhabited by Pashtuns in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) and Baluchistan, eventually became part of Pakistan after the Partition.⁷

⁵ The Line goes through three other Afghan provinces, Nuristan, Badakhshan and Nimruz which have no, or few, Pashtuns. On the other side of the Durand Line are the provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (majority Pashtun), Baluchistan (majority Baluch, but also Pashtuns) and Gilgit Baltistan (only a small number of Pashtuns). Until 2018, when they were merged into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, there were seven semi-autonomous Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) on the Pakistan side of the Line which were directly administered by the federal government. These were, from north to south: Bajaur, Mohmand, Khyber, Orakzai, Kurram, North Waziristan and South Waziristan.

⁶ There is a comparative dearth of unbiased studies about this episode and the subsequently strained diplomatic relations between the two countries. For details, see Louis Dupree, 'Afghanistan', pp 485-494.

⁷ The Khudai Khidmatgaran movement led by Abdul Ghafar Khan advocated for the inclusion of alternative options, such as forming an independent Pashtunistan or joining Afghanistan, to the July 1947 referendum when NWFP residents (but not those of the Tribal Agencies) were asked to decide between Pakistan and India. However, this was not allowed. They ended up boycotting the vote, while the majority of those who did vote, opted for Pakistan.

The Afghan government had objections of its own and, in 1949, a grand assembly, a loya jirga, called all the agreements about the Durand Line void and dead. Later, the idea of Pashtunistan was picked up by Daud Khan, Afghanistan's prime minister (1953-63) and then post-coup president (1973-78). Daud undertook a number of initiatives to publicise his demand for a redrawn border or an independent state for Pashtuns. He not only waged a fierce propaganda war but also ordered the Afghan army into the Tribal Agencies, where they clashed with Pakistani paramilitaries. Daud encouraged and armed the Pashtun tribes to fight against Pakistan, added a national Pashtunistan public holiday to the Afghan calendar (more detail in a previous [AAN report](#)) and named streets and squares in Kabul and Jalalabad after it.



Afghans walk along a fenced corridor at the Spin Boldak crossing point at the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. Photo: AFP, 21 November 2022

Pakistan, given the territorial threat, responded to the Pashtunistan issue and retaliated by closing its ports and borders to Afghan imports and exports, inflicting huge economic pressure on Afghanistan, which, being a landlocked country, relies on Pakistani seaports for transit and trade. Pakistan's reprisals led to serious

economic setbacks for Afghanistan, as one of its most viable commercial routes was closed. Later, Pakistan would also support Afghans who were dissatisfied with Daud's presidential government, providing them, in turn, with weapons and sanctuary. Ultimately, Daud dropped the Durand Line issue entirely and Pakistan re-opened its border crossings, but relations between the two countries remained unfriendly (see Dupree, pp 538-54).

After Daud's assassination in 1978 and the violent regime change, the country was plunged into protracted chaos and Pakistan was able to maintain the upper hand over Afghanistan. The country was not only Afghanistan's most viable option for trade and transit but could also directly influence the Afghan Sunni Muslim mujahedin parties who fought against Daud's successors, the communist regime of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) and its Soviet backers and which had their party headquarters in Pakistan. No Afghan government of any stripe since Daud has seriously attempted to pursue his strategy of actively promoting Pashtunistan. At the same time, no government in Kabul has ever suggested the Durand Line was valid, acceptable or just reasonable, but neither has any administration been able to propose a genuine solution, whether on the international stage or bilaterally, to what Afghans see as a continuing problem.

Pakistani governments have instead been consistent in their efforts to try to compel Afghan governments to officially endorse the Durand Line as the legitimate border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. For example, when the mujahedin finally defeated the PDPA regime in 1992, a key demand from Pakistan was for a bilateral strategic agreement wherein the recognition of the Durand Line as the official border was inserted as a key issue. The then interim Afghan president, Sebghatullah Mujaddedi, turned this request down (For a detailed account of Pakistan's attempts to formalise the Durand Line Agreement, see [this](#) AAN report).

Pakistan again demanded the Line be recognised as the legitimate border in 1996, after the Taleban, a movement heavily supported by Pakistan, seized power in Kabul. The Taleban also declined to negotiate over it. The same rejection of the Durand Line appeared under the Republic when President Hamed Karzai said a key objective of Pakistan was to get recognition of the Durand Line as an official border.

To this day, all Afghan governments have declined to speak of the Line as the official border. In practice, though, the two neighbours provide all the necessary customs and other facilities required for an official border.

However, the status quo has changed in recent years, with Pakistan hardening the physical infrastructure of the Line. Starting from 2017, it has now almost completely fenced it, and at least at the Torkham crossing point between Nangrahar and Peshawar, it now requires a visa and passport from all Afghans to get into Pakistan and from Pakistanis to leave it.

WHO LIVES ON THE DURAND LINE?

The main subjects of this report are the Pashtun tribes, with their common culture, ethnicity, language and traditions, and how the Durand Line split them into two. For example, the three major tribes of Shinwari, Mohmand and Safi straddle the Line between the eastern Afghanistan provinces of Kunar and Nangrahar and Pakistan's Bajaur, Mohmand and Khyber districts. Similarly, the tribes of D Zadran, Gurbaz, Mangal and Turi live in various districts of Khost and Paktia provinces of Afghanistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's North Waziristan and Kurram districts.⁸ Members of the Wazir tribe live in Barmal district of Paktika and across the Line in South and North Waziristan of Pakistan, while members of the Muqbal and Dzazi tribes live in Paktia's border district of Dand au Patan and Kurram district of Pakistan.

As one of our interviewees said, an outsider "can't distinguish these people who are living in two different countries." Another pointed out that "when you visit a village on [the Afghan] side of the Line and then compare it with the other [side], you would see zero difference between them." Another interviewee asserted: "In weddings, ceremonies and customs, the people [living on the two sides] have identical traditions."

In the Chaman city of Pakistan's Baluchistan province, interviewees said it is difficult, if not entirely impossible, to distinguish between the residents of Chaman and the Pashtuns of neighbouring Spin Boldak, Kandahar and the wider southern region of Afghanistan. Inhabitants of the two border cities, in particular, predominantly hail from the same Achakzai tribe. Chaman residents have land, homes and family members in Spin Boldak and Kandahar, while residents of

⁸ The seven former FATA agencies have become districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and are officially integrated into this Pakistani province. However, they are still referred to by their former names both locally and in Afghanistan. For more information, see footnote 4.

Kandahar have properties, businesses and relatives in Chaman and Quetta. A large number hold official ID cards from both Afghanistan and Pakistan. “When they cross to [Spin] Boldak, they use their Afghan tazkira [ID card] and when they go back to Pakistan, they use their *shinakhta* card [Pakistani ID card],” one interviewee said.



Lorries carrying Afghan produce wait to enter Pakistan near the Torkham border crossing in Nangrahar province.

Photo: Shafiullah Kakar/AFP, 15 January 2024

The Line remains poorly demarcated in many places and, until recently, was unmarked in mountainous terrain, making it difficult, even if they wanted to, for locals to determine its exact location on the ground. In areas that are wooded, interviewees said, the tribes themselves have tended to demarcate the Line to find out to which side they fall and have accordingly allocated the woodland to people of that side. “If the woods were identified on the Afghan side, people from that side would have the right to use it, and if it was on the Pakistani side, people of that side would use it,” said one interviewee.

Not only were the residents indistinguishable but travelling between the two countries occurred without problems both for residents of the surrounding

areas and those from other provinces. Official procedures barely existed. One interviewee said that, for many of his fellow villagers, going to the other side of the Line was as easy as going to his native provincial capital of Gardez in Paktia.

The bonds between fellow Pashtuns, especially members of the same tribe, our interviewees said, were so strong that if a person from either side of the Line was caught up in *baadi* (a feud) or was on their government's wanted list, it was common for them to take shelter on the other side of the Line. "They were given refuge by the tribe," one interviewee said, "and no one then dared to hurt them as all the tribe stood behind them."

Even attempts by either state to impede the movement of people from border communities via the Durand Line failed to yield results. At times of political turmoil between Afghanistan and Pakistan, Pakistan could not, in the words of an interviewee, "dare" to hinder such people crossing because the bonds between tribes were strong enough to resist state power.

Moreover, when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan and the fight against the Red Army by the Afghan mujahedin began, millions of Afghans, including mujahedin, took refuge in Pakistan. The Soviet-backed communist government undertook severe measures to restrict people's movement and mujahedin's infiltration into Afghanistan via the Durand Line, but the rugged terrain and strong community bonds that supported the mujahedin made it virtually impossible to seal the Line.

During the Jihad against the Soviets, heightened feelings of solidarity among Muslims further contributed to easing movement restrictions. Afghans, especially those from areas around the Line, found it normal to visit not only what is today Khyber Pakhtunkhwa but also other Pakistani provinces further afield, such as Punjab. The father of one interviewee, for instance, used to regularly visit the Punjabi provincial capital of Lahore and import goods such as auto parts from there. He travelled just on his Afghan *tazkira*, obtained during the rule of Daud Khan, according to his son. Another interviewee had similar family memories:

Our people were going for work and medical treatment to Pakistan. They were hosted by Pashtuns [on the Pakistani side of the Line] in their houses for days. My uncle often tells us they didn't even know the words, 'passport' and 'customs'. Nor, he says, did the [Pakistani] police ask for or demand bribes from people for not having [official travel] documents.

In the 1980s, as they recall, Afghan refugees from the border areas were warmly received by Pakistani Pashtuns, for instance when they arrived from Khost to Kurram Agency. Belonging to the same tribe, they were seen, said one interviewee, “as their own blood and never treated like outsiders,” one interviewee added. Another man, Dzadran by tribe, said that when they moved to Parachinar in Kurram district during the war against the Soviets, locals, who were also ethnic Dzadrans, distributed free land to cultivate and hosted them in their villages. At the same time, for the past hundred years, at times of crisis and opposition to the central government in Kabul, some men from the other side of the Line have volunteered to fight alongside their fellow Pashtuns. They did so in 1929 against Habibullah Kalakani, then occupying the throne in Kabul, and more recently against the Soviet army, the Northern Alliance (the largely Tajik, Hazara and Uzbek factions that came together to fight against the first Islamic Emirate in 1996-2001) and later, the US military and Republic army and police.

DEMARCATING AND THEN FENCING THE LINE

After signing the agreement in 1893, Afghan and British officials demarcated the Durand Line on the ground between 1895 and 1898, albeit it was poorly marked in many locations, especially where the terrain was difficult. However, in practice, people’s lives remained unhindered and continued as normal. Little changed for the residents of the seven Federally Administered Tribal Areas who, even with the establishment of Pakistan, retained the exceptional administrative and legal status received under British India which, at the cost of curtailing their civil rights, guaranteed the tribes a semi-autonomous status. At most, Pakistan established official crossing points on the, thus far, untouched Durand Line on the major historical routes used by communities such as Torkham in Nangrahar, Spin Boldak in Kandahar, Ghulam Khan in Khost, Angor Ada in Paktika and Baramchah in Helmand became main crossing points. Pakistan did not create serious problems and left local communities to live as before. People’s movements, despite the official setup, persisted as normal. One interviewee, now in his 60s, recalls his father’s memories:

When we went to Pakistan, we mostly used Ghulam Khan and, at first, my father told us there was nothing in our way to Pakistan and the gate [ie, the border]. Everyone was going to Pakistan without any problem. In fact, very few people knew which side this was or that was, or when they had reached 'Pakistan'. But as time passed, things changed. Now you see how difficult it is to cross the border.

Despite the tensions later brought by the Soviet and mujahedin military operations, border control set up and infrastructure remained much the same. Circumstances began to change in the early 2000s when the United States backed the establishment of a new Afghan government, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, and especially after the Taliban insurgency developed. Relations with Pakistan soon turned hostile, as Afghanistan's new government pointed the finger of blame at Pakistan for providing support and shelter to the insurgents. The Republic grew more and more antagonistic to Pakistan and leaned towards Islamabad's arch-rival, India. Islamabad, in turn, was chiefly focused on 'strategic depth', the idea that it needed a friendly state behind it as it confronted India. This, coupled with growing insecurity and militancy in the Pakistani tribal areas, prompted it to enforce better control of its border. That, however, could not be achieved without disrupting the lives of the Pashtun tribes straddling the Durand Line.

Islamabad's initial moves amounted to placing restrictions on formal crossing points. It occasionally started closing the gates not only to trade but also to individuals from communities that lived around the Durand Line, restricting their movements by demanding documents such as ID cards and passports or simply not allowing them to cross. These restrictions were later institutionalised: in late May 2016, Islamabad officially announced passport and visa requirements for entering Pakistan through the Torkham gate in Nangrahar (see [Al Jazeera](#) report).

During the early 2010s, Pakistan started digging trenches – two metres deep and two metres wide. The ditches were mostly dug on the edge of the southern provinces of Kandahar and Helmand. However, they failed to completely meet the apparent objective – stopping cross-border movement.

Pakistan's most serious move was carried out in 2017, when it decided to fence the entire Durand Line (see this [DW report](#)). Key to Pakistan's motivation was to prevent Pakistani militants, mainly Pakistani [Taliban](#) (Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan or TTP), from infiltrating from Afghanistan. Additionally, it may have wanted to

obstruct Afghans, refugees or those seeking work from easily migrating to Pakistan. However, many people, including most of our interviewees, were suspicious of Pakistan's intentions, arguing that the fence was, in essence, an attempt to legitimise the Durand Line and separate Pashtuns from each other so that, as one interviewee said, "They don't unite and demand the elimination of the Line in the future."



Afghan women cross the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan through the Shamshad mountains in Nangrahar province.

Photo: Noorullah Shirzada/AFP, 12 May 2016

The decision faced a significant public backlash in Afghanistan. The Republic condemned the fence with the strongest of statements. President Ashraf Ghani, at a public gathering in Paktia, said, "Those people who want to divide us with barbed wire should think again; aeroplanes and bombs didn't separate us; the fence only needs a few cuts." He added that the fence is incapable of "erasing history; love and blood are inseparable" (see [this](#) BBC Pashto report).

Afghans everywhere took to the streets to voice their objections. They viewed the fence as an illegal attempt to divide families and tribes. Residents of Paktia

appealed to the Afghan government to allow them to remove the fence and prevent more of it going up. In Paktika, protestors announced that 3,000 young men from the province were prepared to go to the Line and remove the fence (see [Bakhtar News](#)). The Afghan military also sporadically clashed with Pakistani soldiers locally and attempted to prevent its erection if possible or destroy it if not (see [this](#) AAN report of border clashes). In areas where tribal structures were powerful, locals did manage to prevent Pakistani forces from erecting the fence. This was at least the case in Khost's Dzazi Maidan district, where the Line remains unfenced. Even the Taliban reacted, though not publicly: in Helmand, in 2018, according to the author's information, they destroyed several kilometres of the fence and clashed with Pakistani security forces. However, the matter was resolved later.

In April 2023, the director of Pakistan's armed forces' public relations wing, the Inter-Services Public Relations, Ahmed Sharif, said that Pakistan had completed 98 per cent of its fence project along the 2,600-kilometre-long Durand Line (see [TOLOnews](#) report [here](#)). The fence consists of two palisades, each two metres tall and with a metre of space in between. A further half-metre of barbed wire covers their tops. In addition to the fence, Pakistan has also established hundreds of checkpoints along it. In populated areas, the checkpoints are built every 100 to 150 metres, while they are less frequent in rough and mountainous terrain. The fence has severely affected every sphere of life for the local tribes, from economy and trade to culture, traditions and family relations.

HOW THE FENCE HAS DIVIDED COMMUNITIES, FAMILIES AND FARMS

“Under no law, under no religion,” said one interviewee from Paktia's Dand au Patan district, “is it rightful to split families and set up a barrier between [those divided].” Many others described the fence as, “passing not through the land, but through [our] hearts.” They were quick to use words such as “savage” and “inhumane” to describe it, while one community elder from Khost's Gurbaz district said:

When the fence began [to be put up], the feelings we had were the same as when we lose a family member. It was disturbing. Even a cruel infidel wouldn't have done such an act that separated brother from brother. We'd never imagined it before and would never forgive those who did this and those who enabled them.

The fence has split villages and even some families. Half of the family of one farmer the author spoke to, for instance, live on the Pakistani side of the Line while he, along with his two brothers, remain on the Afghan side. During a March 2022 trip to Kandahar's Spin Boldak, the author also observed that one farmer had a well on the Afghan side of the Line, while most of his lands were on the Pakistani side. He knew of at least two similar cases in Khost and Paktia. One interviewee, from Paktika, in his 50s, explained:

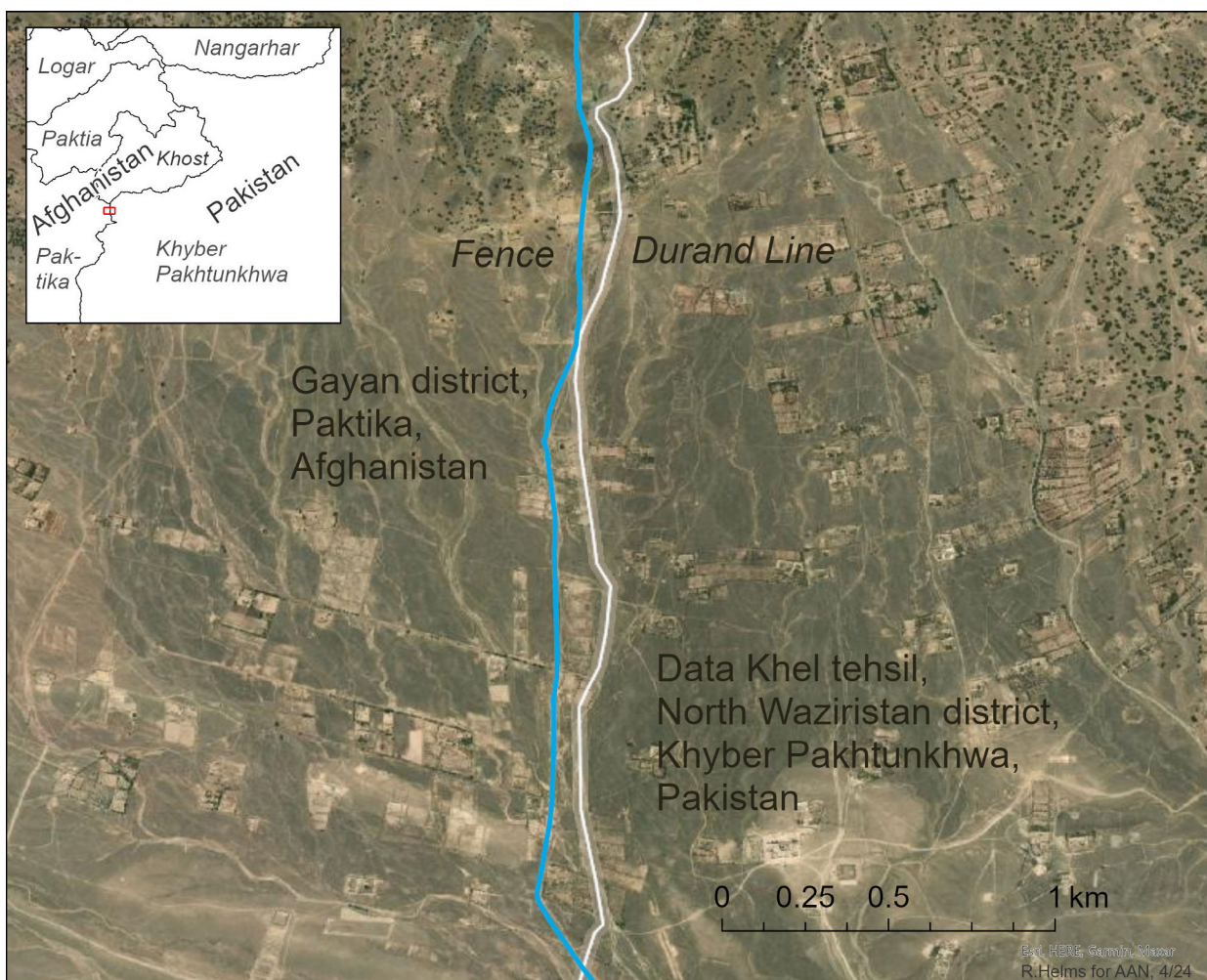
In Kharsin [a border village in Barmal district], people lived happily and no one cared whether they were Pakistanis or Afghans because the entire village consisted of one clan. But when the fence reached the village, Pakistani security forces pointed to an area in the middle of the village and said: Up to this point, the village belongs to Pakistan and they would establish the fence there. People told them a lot not to do that. They even begged them, but the Pakistani forces weren't convinced. The poor villagers didn't have enough power to resist them, so the fence was established and cut the village in half. There are even families that have some of their relatives on the Afghan side and some on the Pakistani. Now, the Pakistanis have even established a posta [security checkpoint] outside the village. People and relatives can only wave at each other from afar and when they want to see each other, they should either bribe the Pakistanis or travel a long, long way to pass through the official gate.

Such cases of split villages are not scarce. Almost every interviewee had either direct experience of such an occurrence or knew a similar story. In Kunar province, for instance, one interviewee said his fellow villager had married a woman from the Kaga area of Pakistan's Bajaur Agency. Prior to the fence, they could move between the two countries freely and his wife would visit her family in Bajaur frequently. However, after the fence was established, she could no longer visit her family and now only sees them once every two to three years and, even then, after travelling a long distance and passing through the official crossing point. Similar cases of split villages and families were reported in [this](#) Enikass TV report and in reports [here](#) and [here](#) from VOA Pashto, respectively, from Kunar, Nuristan and

Spin Boldak.) A schoolteacher in his 40s from Nangrahar province explained how it had hit his community:

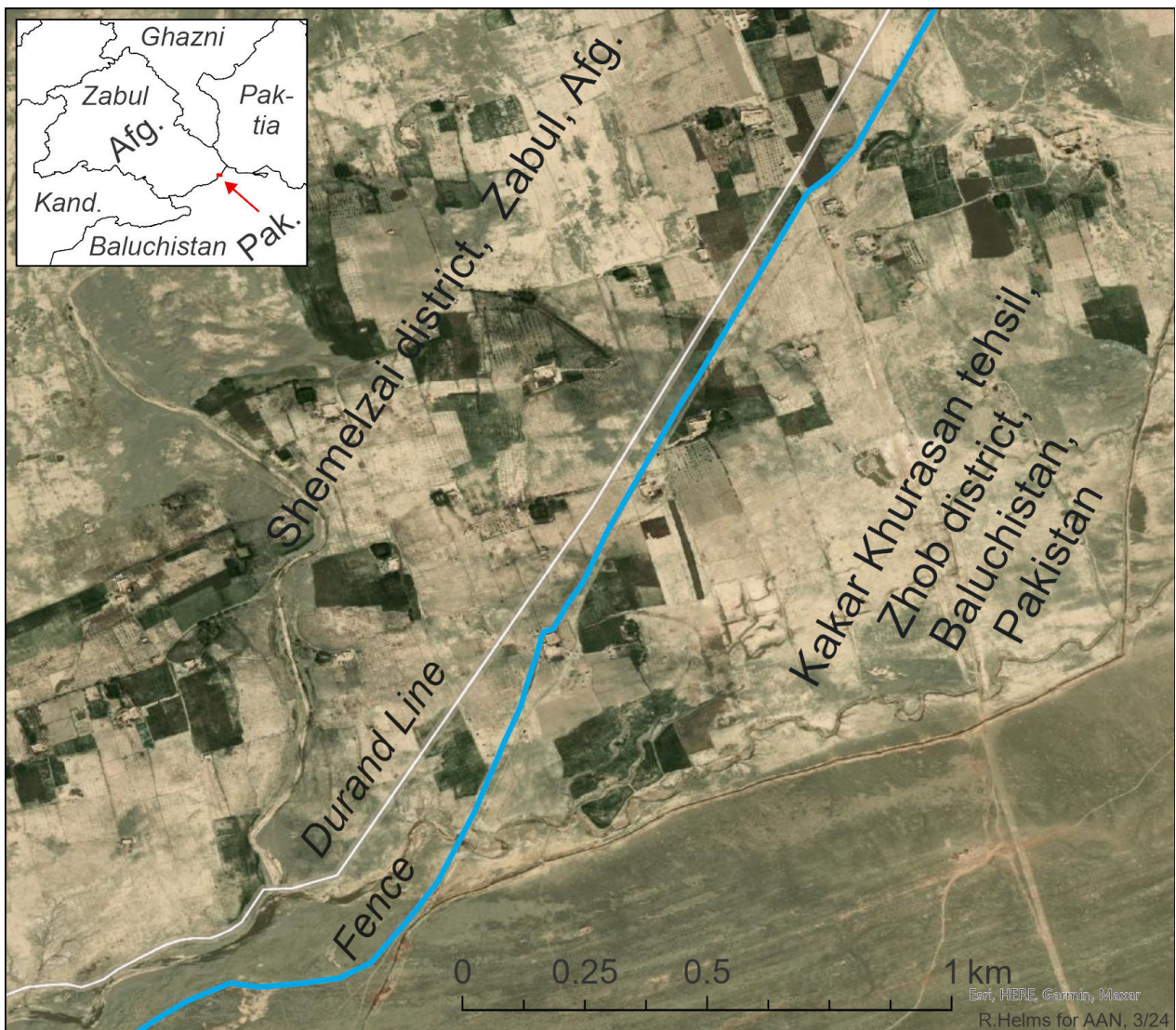
Before the fence, we could freely go to Bajaur, Mohmand and Peshawar. We went to weddings, funerals and other ceremonies. People from that side were coming to join in our ceremonies. We invited them to jirgas [tribal assemblies] when a problem arose, and we participated in their jirgas and had our place in key tribal decisions there. Moreover, in our village, many of our villagers married women from Bajaur and many people married off their daughters and sisters [to men] in Bajaur.... We can no longer visit each other the way we did before.

The two Satellite images below show two instances of settlements located along the Durand Line that were separated by the Pakistani fence, with no official border crossings nearby.



The Durand Line and Pakistani fence on the Paktika-South Waziristan border.

Source: Roger Helms for AAN, 2024



Durand Line and Pakistani fence on the Zabol-Baluchistan border.

Source: Roger Helms for AAN, 2024

The problems created by the fence do not end there: the poorly demarcated nature of the Line and the claim that Pakistan tends to try to encroach onto Afghan territory have further complicated the situation for both locals and governments. Our interviewees and media reports allege that Pakistan has encroached on Afghan territory in several areas and erected the fence on land that belonged to Afghanistan (see [this](#) and [this](#) reports from TOLONews and [this](#) from Pajhwok News Agency). When Pakistan started this project, many areas along the Line were insecure and contested between the then Afghan government and the insurgents, with neither side having firm control. With Kabul unable to hold sway over its own territory, the allegation is that Pakistan was able to, as one interviewee called it, “grab Afghanistan’s land.” One interviewee said that before the fence went up,

Pakistan's security checkpoints on what locals call the *sifri noqta* or 'zero point', ie the last inch of Afghan territory belonging to Dzanza Khil village in Khost's Tani district, was almost a fifteen-minute car ride from the village centre. Pakistan moved in, say locals and built the fence on Afghan land and now half of Dzanza Khil village is on the Pakistani side of the Line.

Another interviewee from Spin Boldak of Kandahar told AAN that Pakistan had encroached five kilometres into Afghan territory in the Ghulam Manda area of his district. He backed up his claim by giving an example: the village's cemetery, which was originally and historically demarcated inside Afghan territory, was now on the Pakistani side of the fence.

IEA Chief of Army Staff Qari Fasihuddin Fetrat endorsed what our interviewees had said about areas like Dzanza Khil in a recent [interview](#) with TOLONews, saying, "When we went to observe the borders, there were places where encroachment had happened." What prompted cross-border clashes between the IEA and Pakistan, he added, were Pakistan's attempts "to establish the fence [not] where the Line is [demarcated] but on the [Afghan] side." The author also spoke to other Taliban officials involved in border-related issues about this matter. One alleged (without giving details) that during the Republic, "not only Pakistan but many other neighbours have snatched kilometres of Afghan territory." Another said:

The previous government hadn't dared to watch its borders and the Durand Line for years. They, in fact, didn't care about it. This ministry was doing nothing. Therefore, many neighbours took this opportunity and established and moved their borders inside Afghan territory. When we went to GPS the border and checked the original map we've had in our ministry since the Line was demarcated, we figured out that Pakistan had seized dozens of Afghan villages.

Some interviewees, like the Taliban officials, also accused the Republic of being too submissive to Pakistan at the time, allowing it to establish the fence in areas where it could have prevented it. However, given the fierceness of the insurgency, that might have been difficult.

DAMAGE TO THE ECONOMY

Apart from the harm done to family ties, restrictions on the Durand Line have also significantly hurt trade and the local economy. In many towns located on or near the Line, locals used to trade irrespective of where they lived and did business on both sides. Afghans could also easily cross and travel to Pakistani cities for medical treatment.

In the border towns of Chaman and Spin Boldak, locals from both sides have always run major businesses, with merchants and labourers easily crossing the Line. In Spin Boldak and Kandahar city, residents of Chaman and Quetta own large markets, auto showrooms and other businesses. “Chamanians come here in the morning, do business and go back home [to Chaman] in the evening,” said one interviewee.

In other areas, locals from Afghanistan used to sell their goods and crops in Pakistan and vice versa. Interviewees said people from Parachinar, the capital of Kurram district, had shops in Khost, Paktia and Paktika’s local and district bazaars. Many merchants from the Pakistan side imported goods from Afghan bazaars as accessing them was easier and the prices of certain goods lower than going to Pakistan’s cities.

Speaking to VOA Deewa News in January 2022, the former head of Torkham Labour Association, Farman Shinwari, said: “We bring things like *gowra* [a local sweet], *daal* [lentils], *shoda* [milk] and other goods that are cheap on the [Afghan side of the Line] and sell them in the bazaar in Peshawar. But since the fence was established, we’ve faced multiple problems. We have problems [in crossing the border via] Torkham; we can’t get a token [a temporary sheet of paper instead of visa] or a visa.” A resident of Landi Kotal, in Khyber district, said the fence was also affecting “thousands of people in Landi Kotal bazaar. People from Afghanistan were coming to purchase oil and other commodities, but the fence hasn’t only affected our bazaar but also the entire surrounding area [along the Durand Line]” (see the report [here](#)).

In addition to hampering legal trade, various crossings on the Durand Line have also been key routes for transporting goods that were legally banned by either the Afghan or Pakistani states or to avoid customs. During the 1980s and the war with the Soviets and later during the Taleban insurgency against the US, smugglers used

to traffic military vehicles, copper, and weapons as well as goods and livestock such as wheat and sheep. Some merchants also chose not to cross the Line via official crossing points but through informal ways to avoid taxes on their goods.



Villagers gather for a wedding in Khost province's Derezda Valley in the rugged Spira mountains along the Afghanistan-Pakistan Border.

Photo: David Furst/AFP, 20 November 2008

Many of these businesses, particularly in the eastern and southeastern parts of the country, have been hard hit as the fence and other restrictions on movement make it difficult for locals to cross the Line. Recently, Pakistan also announced visa requirements at the Chaman-Boldak gate in Kandahar province and Angor Ada in Paktika, prompting strong reactions from its citizens in both places. They have staged a sit-in – five months and counting – and entirely shut the border in the face of trade and transit since October 2023 (see [TOLOnews](#) and [Spogmai Radio](#)).

The Republic and locals accused Pakistan not only of encroachment but also of attempting to “steal the population,” as one interviewee put it. He explained that in many of the border villages and even districts, Pakistan deliberately provided Afghans with Pakistani identity cards. This was particularly evident, he said, in the

Afghan border districts of Shamalzi in Zabul and Spin Boldak in Kandahar. They also distributed Pakistani SIM cards for residents, which can be used with the more accessible network Pakistan has established on its borders. Our interviewees interpreted these efforts as part of a wider Pakistani tendency to move the Line into Afghan territory steadily.

HOW ARE PEOPLE FINDING WAYS AROUND (OR THROUGH) THE FENCE?

As explained above, the fence has, in practice, separated families and villages. However, the bonds between communities remain strong and the two-metre-tall fence has not entirely cut them off from each other. Locals maintain their relationships and always find a way to visit family, participate in weddings, funerals, and other ceremonies and have a say in each other's affairs. Nevertheless, all these happen at a significant cost and often at some risk.

For the most part, communities' relations and movement occur in two ways. One is getting to the other side of the Line via formal channels, which requires travelling to official crossing points. There, the Pakistanis allow people who hail from the areas around the Line to pass without a visa using their ID cards. At some crossing points, such as Khost's Ghulam Khan, residents of districts bordering the Line receive a temporary sheet of paper, or a token, instead of a visa. It allows them to stay for a specific number of days. People on the Pakistani side of the Line can enter Afghanistan, quite comfortably, just by showing their ID cards.

At the major border of Torkham in Nangrahar, only Afghans holding visas are now allowed to cross into Pakistan. At Spin Boldak, residents of Kandahar province used to be allowed to pass through the gate after presenting their ID cards. However, Islamabad has recently announced that they would now require a visa for everyone at the Chaman-Spin Boldak crossing point as well.

However, the policy of allowing locals to pass the Line only with their ID cards or a paper sheet is also inconsistent and depends on the general political atmosphere between the two countries. At times when relations are antagonistic, Pakistan

closes its doors not only to trade but also to locals who could otherwise pass without a visa. Ghulam Khan of Khost, for instance, was entirely closed for over a month in 2022 and again in early 2023. Angor Ada, in Paktika, also occasionally gets closed.



Afghan protesters burn a Pakistani flag during a demonstration following clashes between border forces in Asadabad, Kunar province.

Photo: AFP, 6 May 2013

People also use informal crossings. Interviewees said that in several areas where Pakistani checkpoints are not too close together, they have, for instance, cut the fence in a way that is not easily detectable, sometimes even with the permission of Pakistani soldiers. “People snip the bottom of the fence and dig a hole under it so that one person can pass through/under it. Once they’ve passed, they tie the fence back together, so it doesn’t look like it’s been ripped,” one interviewee said. This is a risky endeavour, the interviewee said, as Pakistani security forces have opened fire on locals after detecting their movement: “When they notice the fence is cut ... they immediately fix it and increase their surveillance in that area.”

Interviewees did point out that it used to be the case that in many places along the Line, Pakistani security forces were made up of Pashtuns who sympathised with locals, often allowing them to cross the Line through small doors in the fence. However, some interviewees reported they have now mostly been replaced with Frontier Corps, who are more likely to hail from Pakistan's non-Pashtun provinces and to be less immediately sympathetic. On the other hand, in some areas crossed by the Line which are far from Pakistani cities and where logistics make it difficult to supply the soldiers, Pakistani troops rely on locals for commodities and food and in return, permit them to cross the fence.

The most common and safest way for locals to cross the de facto border, though, is by bribing Pakistani soldiers. There are small doors in the fence along the Line, often adjacent to security checkpoints. If locals pay bribes to the security officers, they, in return, open the doors and allow them to cross. "Every Pakistani soldier [securing] the border," said one interviewee, "takes bribes. And once you pay them, they allow you to get in and out – even if you have explosives." Once in Pakistan, Afghans are barely questioned and are indistinguishable from local residents.

Enduring all these hardships, residents of border areas have kept their cross-border movement intact – to some extent. However, the glitches the fence has brought to their lives remain significant, deeply affecting families, tribes and trade. What used to be a normal, everyday activity has become a headache, costly, in terms of money for bribes and/or travel and time, and also, carrying some risk.

As the two governments have been unable or unwilling to solve this issue, Pashtuns in both countries have voiced their criticism of the fence and the restrictions it has brought. Afghan activists have repeatedly called for a solution to the Line, and a Pashtun's major tribal assembly or *jirga* held in March 2022 in Bannu, at which 5,000 Pashtuns from the Pakistani side of the Line had gathered, "strongly denounce[ed] the fence on the Durand Line." They demanded that "all ancient trade routes should be fully opened for trade and free movement of the people of the two sides [respected]" (see [this](#) DW report).

More recently, when, in October 2023, Islamabad announced it would require passports and visas from all Afghans to enter Pakistan through Chaman gate in Spin Boldak, thousands of people in Chaman, Baluchistan, began a sit-in, demanding Pakistan to retreat from its decision. The protest continues with its demands yet to be met by the Pakistani government.

However, none of these protests and petitions have produced tangible results. The Durand Line controversy is, in part, one aspect of a wider and more protracted conflict – the policies of states towards tribes and the lack of a common position among the different segments of Pashtun society to decide on specific demands and how to put enough pressure on states to change their policy.

For many, the logic of the fence is questionable as it fails to achieve what it was intended to do. The past few years have demonstrated that it is unable to stop militant infiltration to and from Pakistan. If the fence had been effective, why has it failed to prevent TTP crossing it – as Pakistan alleges?

THE POLITICS OF THE DURAND LINE

Afghanistan and Pakistan's relations have been unfriendly for most of the time since Pakistan's independence in 1947 and the chief dispute has been the Durand Line. Pakistan has repeatedly proclaimed that it is the legitimate official border between the two countries; Afghanistan, on the other hand, insists it is merely a line, not a border. Yet, the last time Afghanistan had an active policy on the Durand Line was in the 1970s, during Daud Khan's era, when he sought to form an independent Pashtun state. After that, given the successive invasions and wars, Afghans have barely had the opportunity to reflect on the issue. Yet, the Durand Line has remained a popular cause in Afghanistan.

Currently, relations between Pakistan and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) are at odds over the border, with occasional clashes and closures to trade and transit of goods (see [RFERL/ Radio Azadi](#) and [Al Jazeera](#)). There have been reports of the IEA disrupting the erection of the fence, for example, as this [Reuters](#) report from December 2021 relating to Nangrahar states. In September 2023, the Afghan Ministry of Defence announced the establishment of 100 new security checkpoints and a road along the Line to oversee it effectively (see [TOLOnews](#)).

Another issue has only added salt to the wound – the recent forced return of more than half a million Afghans who were living in Pakistan. It has prompted senior Afghan officials to raise objections publicly and explicitly to the Durand Line. IEA Director of Finance and Administration at the Ministry of Martyrs and Disabled

Affairs, Maulawi Kalimullah Afghan, speaking to a gathering on 24 November 2023, for example, said: “Afghan refugees didn’t live on your soil; they lived in autonomous and occupied Pashtunistan. They [lived] either in Baluchistan or Peshawar, which is in occupied Pashtunistan, the land of Greater Afghanistan” (see [Radio Azadi](#) and this video [posted](#) by Afghan researcher Abdul Sayed on Twitter/X).



A group of Afghan men watch as Pakistani paramilitary troops install iron fencing at the Torkham crossing at the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

Photo: Tariq Mahmood/AFP, 1 December 2001

Calling it “an imaginary line,” acting Minister of Borders and Tribal Affairs Nurullah Nuri also said: “We neither have an official border with Pakistan nor do we have a zero point with Pakistan” (see [TOLONews](#)). Acting Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Abbas Stanakzai also said: “We have never recognised Durand and will never recognise it, today half of Afghanistan is separated and is on the other side of the Durand Line. Durand is the line which was drawn by the English through the heart of Afghans” (see [TOLONews](#)).

Again, referring to Pakistan's forced expulsion of Afghan refugees, Afghan Minister of Defence, Mullah Yaqub, also implicitly warned Islamabad: "The Pakistani regime should weigh the consequences of everything it does and sow only as much as it [is prepared to] reap" (see Ariana News [here](#)). Pakistani caretaker prime minister, Anwar Kakar, subsequently insisted in an [interview](#) with TOLONews that the Durand Line *was* the internationally accepted border between the two countries. Similarly, in response to Abbas Stanakzai's remarks, Pakistan's Foreign Ministry said in a statement that "Any self-serving and fanciful claims regarding the legality and sanctity of the Pak-Afghan border cannot change the facts of geography, history and international law" (see [Ariana News](#)).

Whatever quarrels are played out in the media, and however long affected communities suffer, no one expects the two states to ease the restrictions on people's lives any time soon, given the domestic politics within both countries. Practically speaking, Daud's dream of establishing an independent Pashtun state, or of annexing Afghanistan's former tribal areas on the other side of the Durand Line appear odd and unfeasible to the two states and to residents. What would be helpful, though, would be a softening of restrictions on movement and trade. That is especially the case for those living along the Line, who long to enjoy the freedom once again to easily reach farmland and see friends and relatives from whom they are currently severed.

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Design and layout by Žolt Kovač

Cover photo: Pakistani troops patrol the Afghanistan-Pakistan border at the Big Ben post in the Khyber district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.
Photo: Aamir Qureshi/AFP, 3 August 2021