

US demands lead to border clashes between Pakistan and Afghanistan

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Pakistan's attempts to tighten security along its border have led to a series of clashes with US-occupied Afghanistan. On Thursday, for the second time this week, Pakistani forces in the Kurram tribal agency fired mortars and rockets at positions in the adjacent Afghan province of Paktia. Four Afghan troops were killed, while US aircraft reportedly buzzed the skies overhead.

The incident underscores the tensions that exist along the volatile frontier. Last Sunday, at least eight Afghan border police and four civilians were killed in the same area after an exchange of gunfire with Pakistani troops. Both sides have blamed the other for initiating the fighting.

Pakistan has insisted that the clash broke out after Afghan forces unleashed “unprovoked” gunfire at several border posts. According to the Afghan interior ministry, the Pakistani troops were four kilometres inside the Zazi district of Paktia and had taken over two border posts. Afghan police and tribal militiamen drove them back and briefly seized two checkpoints on the Pakistani side near the town of Teri Mangal before withdrawing.

The following day, the governor of Paktia, Rahmatullah Rahmat, told Radio Free Afghanistan that the Pakistani army was “still attacking our positions with artillery and threatening our security posts. Their artillery fire has damaged our villages, clinics and schools, and civilians have suffered a lot”. Rahmat alleged that 41 Afghan police and civilians had been killed or wounded.

Whatever the exact circumstances, the fighting alarmed US and NATO commanders in Paktia province. A mediation meeting between Afghan and Pakistani officials, attended by NATO officers, was organised last Monday in Teri Mangal. The diplomacy ended with a gunfight in which a Pakistani officer allegedly shot and killed an American soldier and wounded three others before being shot down.

Pakistan insisted that both the American and its own officer were killed during an attack on the meeting by “miscreants”—the label used for local tribesmen who are opposed to the presence of government troops in the frontier region. NATO said the assailant was wearing a Pakistani

army uniform and demanded the Pakistani government conduct a full investigation into the incident.

This week's violence follows battles last month when Afghan forces fought with Pakistani troops erecting a barbed wire barrier along a 35-kilometre stretch of the border in the North Waziristan tribal agency. Pakistan announced last December that it intended to erect fences along portions of the 2,640-kilometre frontier. Tribal leaders denounced the plan as “detrimental to the social and economic interests of the ethnic Pashtun tribes” that live on both sides of the border. The Afghan government, desperate to win support in the predominantly Pashtun south of the country, wrote to the United Nations expressing its “deep concern”. International condemnation led Pakistan to drop plans to lay minefields.

Behind the clashes are historical disagreements over the border. Pakistan insists on the “Durand Line”—the border negotiated with the Afghan king by British-ruled India in 1893. The Durand Line was drafted to ensure that the key strategic roads down from the mountains to the Indus River were included in British territory. The British never exerted anything resembling real control beyond the Indus. The Durand Line, however, formally split the lands of the fiercely independent Pashtun tribes who inhabit the area and to whom tribal allegiances took precedence over any loyalties to the Afghan state.

After the partition of India and the formation of Pakistan, the new Pakistani ruling elite effected a continuation of the division. In a delicate compromise, the tribes agreed to join Pakistan provided they were granted autonomy over their traditional land and the region was exempted from customs. These terms enabled the Pashtun to continue to move and trade freely into southern Afghanistan. Afghan Pashtun nationalists, however, bitterly rejected the deal and insisted that all the Pashtun tribal land to the Indus River—so-called Pashtunistan—should be incorporated into Afghanistan. Afghanistan is the only UN member state that does not recognise the Durand Line.

Until recently, the exact location of the border has been something of a moot point. The central Pakistani

government generally respected the autonomy of its Federally Administrated Tribal Areas (FATA) and weak Afghan regimes exerted little authority over the Pashtun south. Even during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s, Pashtun *mujahaddin*, as well as foreign fighters associated with Osama bin Laden, were able to organise much of their US-backed guerilla war from nominally Pakistani territory. The predominantly Pashtun Taliban movement, which enjoyed the support of the Pakistani government and military, also organised the initial stages of its campaign to take power in Afghanistan from the FATA and refugee camps in other Pakistani provinces.

The US invasion in October 2001 to overthrow the Taliban, however, means that the relations that have prevailed in the border region are an obstacle to the US plans to dominate Afghanistan. The border tribes are generally sympathetic to the guerilla war being fought against the American invasion by Taliban and Pashtun fighters and provide them with safe havens.

After September 11, 2001, Musharraf abandoned the Taliban and declared his support for the US invasion in order to maintain Pakistan's alliance with Washington—its principal support against its main rival India. It took years of intense pressure from the Bush administration, however, before Musharraf agreed to violate the autonomy of the tribes. In February 2004, he finally bowed to Washington and ordered as many as 80,000 troops into the FATA to dislodge Afghan guerillas.

The Pakistani military incursion led to two-and-half years of inconclusive combat against resentful tribesmen, in which as many as 900 Pakistani soldiers were killed. The extent of the tribal resistance, and talk of a rebellion against the operations by Pashtun members of the Pakistan military, compelled Musharraf to strike a truce last September in North Waziristan.

The Taliban or Taliban sympathisers have been left in de-facto control of remote villages across the poverty-stricken and economically backward FATA. Sporadic violence is still taking place against the Pakistani army in parts of the region. Clashes took place on Tuesday between tribal militants and Pakistani forces in the town of Tank in South Waziristan.

The festering tensions are a factor in the broader opposition that has erupted against Musharraf's regime in recent months. Nevertheless, the pressure from Washington to seal the border has not eased. Just the week before last Sunday's clashes, NATO secretary general Jaap de Hoop Scheffer met with Musharraf and lectured him that "every effort, every investment, should be made to see that the porous border is adequately under surveillance and adequately under control".

Both the Bush administration and the Afghan president,

Hamid Karzai, regularly blame Pakistan for their inability to end the insurgency raging against US and NATO forces. Karzai has gone as far as to accuse the Pakistani government of providing covert support to Taliban loyalists. Relations between Karzai and Musharraf are so tense that they refused to shake hands last September during a joint media appearance with Bush at the White House.

Musharraf and Karzai did agree last year to convene a *jirga* or tribal council in the frontier region to discuss how the border could be secured, but the meeting has not still taken place. Further talks between the two leaders in Turkey last month resulted only in platitudes about "greater cooperation" in combating "terrorism"—the catch-all phrase applied to opponents of the US occupation of Afghanistan.

The reality is that Musharraf is between a rock and a hard place. Washington's demands can only be realised by a politically explosive escalation in the repression being inflicted on the Pashtun tribes. In the FATA, the tribes will resist any continued erosion of their autonomy, fueling support for the Taliban and national recriminations against his regime. In Afghanistan, they will continue to fight the US-NATO occupation and also resist any Pakistani attempts to fence or regulate their movements over the Durand Line.

Another incendiary factor is now emerging in an already volatile situation. Anxious to demonstrate he is meeting US calls to stop insurgent activity inside Pakistan, Musharraf has alleged that the 119 Afghan refugee camps in the country are bastions of the Taliban and drug smugglers. The Pakistani government has set a deadline of 2010 for the closure of the camps in order to pressure their two million predominantly Pashtun inhabitants to return to Afghanistan.

This week, violence erupted at a camp, due to be shut by July, near Peshawar in the North West Frontier Province and another in Baluchistan, slated to close by September. Refugees allege that government forces entered the camps and began destroying shops and homes. Many of the inhabitants have lived in Pakistan for over 20 years or were born there and would be utterly destitute if forced back to Afghanistan. This refugee policy will only create further political unrest on both sides of the border and increase the danger of further clashes.



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