

Afghanistan-Pakistan border clash erupts amid seething regional tensions

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Relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan are fraught after a clash Friday over their disputed border killed at least twelve people and possibly many more, while forcing up to ten thousand villagers to flee for their lives.

The hostilities between Afghanistan and Pakistan come amid a surge in tensions between India and Pakistan that threatens to escalate into border clashes, tit-for-tat military incursions, and even all-out war between South Asia's rival nuclear-armed powers.

India's military and government have repeatedly vowed that they will inflict bloody punishment on Pakistan for an alleged May 1 cross-border raid by Pakistani troops that killed two Indian soldiers.

Friday's clashes erupted near the Chaman border crossing between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Pakistani census officials were prevented by Afghan security forces from canvassing villages that the latter insist are within Afghan territory. A spokesman for the governor of Afghanistan's Kandahar province told the *New York Times* the Pakistani census team "crossed the frontier in disputed territory as they were trying to include two villages in the counting."

Islamabad disputes this, saying that it had informed Afghan officials of the census operations, that the census-takers remained within Pakistani territory at all times, and that Afghan forces opened fire on them. "Since April 30," declared a statement from the Pakistani military, "Afghan Border Police had been creating hurdles" to conducting the census in the "divided villages of Killi Luqman and Killi Jahangir in the Chaman area, on the Pakistani side of the border."

Fighting between Afghan and Pakistani forces reportedly raged for hours, only ending late Friday. Initial reports said twelve people had died, including civilians and troops from both countries, and scores had been wounded. However, on Sunday the Inspector General of Pakistan's Frontier Corps in Balochistan, Major General Nadeem Anjum, told a press conference that Pakistani forces had in fact killed 50 Afghan security personnel, injured some 100 hundred more, and destroyed four or five Afghan border checkpoints.

According to Anjum, the fighting ended when the battered Afghan forces pleaded for a ceasefire.

Kabul has rejected Anjum's claims as "baseless."

Two "flag" meetings Saturday between local Afghan and Pakistani commanders failed to reach any resolution to the dispute. But at a third meeting on Sunday the commanders reportedly agreed to collaborate in a geological survey to better delineate the border.

Nevertheless, troops on both sides of the border remain on alert and the Chaman border crossing, one of the two major conduits for trade and NATO supplies from Pakistan to landlocked Afghanistan, remains closed.

Friday's Afghan-Pakistan border clash was the worst in years. It comes as the US military is about to forward to the Trump administration its recommendations for breaking the "stalemate" in the now fifteen-year-old Afghan war. The Pentagon's recommendations reportedly include deploying some 5,000 additional American troops to Afghanistan.

Although the details of the Trump administration's Afghan policy have yet to be finalized, it has already made clear that it views a bolstered American presence in Afghanistan as vital.

Invariably, the US media and political and military-intelligence establishments frame the US involvement in Afghanistan from the standpoint of the phony "war on terror." But the real factors driving US policy toward Afghanistan today, as in 2001, are its proximity to oil-rich Central Asia and states that Washington views as major strategic rivals—China, Russia, and Iran.

Trump's National Security Advisor, Lt. Gen. H. R. McMaster, visited Kabul and Islamabad in the middle of April, just days after the US military bombed Afghanistan with the largest nonnuclear weapon in its arsenal, the Massive Ordnance Air Blast (MOAB) bomb.

During his visit, McMaster pressed Pakistan to do more to support the US war in Afghanistan, including by taking military action against the Haqqani Network, a Taliban-allied militia said to have bases in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas. Whilst in Kabul and to the

visible satisfaction of his hosts, McMaster declared that Pakistan security forces “must go after the militant groups”—i.e. the Taliban and its allies—that have established safe havens in Pakistan “less selectively,” and “pursue its interests in Afghanistan, and elsewhere, through the use of diplomacy and not through the use of proxies.”

Relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan have been in free fall for years. Kabul has long charged that Islamabad is allowing the Haqqani Network and some other Taliban factions space to function so as to ensure that it has a decisive say in any “political settlement” of the Afghan War. For five years or more, Islamabad has countercharged that Afghan intelligence is providing backing to the so-called Pakistan Taliban, which has carried out numerous terrorist attacks inside Pakistan, including frequently targeting the country’s Christian and Shia minorities.

Afghanistan has also become an increasingly significant battleground in the strategic rivalry between India and Pakistan.

For decades, Pakistan was Washington’s principal ally and military partner in South Asia. But over the past decade the US has downgraded its ties with Islamabad to pursue closer relations with India. With the aim of integrating India into its military-strategic offensive against China, Washington—under Democratic and Republican administrations alike—has lavished strategic “favours” on India, while dismissing Islamabad’s increasingly alarmed warnings that the US has overturned the regional balance of power and is thereby encouraging Indian belligerence.

Last Thursday, Indian Army chief General Bipin Rawat gave a bellicose address in which he called for dramatic hikes in India’s military spending and a push to develop new alliances so as to strategically encircle China and Pakistan. Rawat touted Afghanistan for its potential to assist India’s strategic ambitions, including in the encirclement of both India’s main rivals. “It,” said Rawat, “not only helps us in creating (a) two-front dilemma for our western neighbour (Pakistan), but also encirclement of our northern neighbour (China) from the west.”

Rawat’s call to strengthen relations with Afghanistan is all the more provocative as Islamabad has repeatedly accused Indian and Afghan intelligence of conspiring together against Pakistan.

With Washington’s encouragement, New Delhi has already greatly expanded relations with Kabul, including military-security ties.

In recent months India has also openly encouraged Kabul to adopt a more assertive attitude towards Islamabad. The shift in policy has coincided with India’s own increasingly aggressive posture against Pakistan. Last August, India launched a campaign to isolate Pakistan internationally and

brand it as a “state sponsor of terrorism.” Then in late September, it declared it had mounted an illegal cross-border strike inside Pakistan-held Kashmir and publicly boasted that this represented the repudiation of its purported policy of “strategic restraint” vis-à-vis Pakistan.

Last December, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani infuriated Islamabad by joining with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in attacking Pakistan as a supporter of terrorism during the “Heart of Asia” international conference on Afghanistan. Accusing Pakistan of providing safe havens to the Taliban, Ghani demanded, “I want clarifications on what is being done to prevent the export of terror.”

Kabul has also aggressively opposed Pakistan’s efforts to fence the border between the two states and amplified its opposition to the current border—a British colonial-imposed frontier known as the Durand Line that Afghan governments have always refused to recognize.

Last June, when Pakistan sought to fence and otherwise harden the border at Torkham, border clashes ensued in which one Pakistani officer and two Afghan soldiers were killed.

Islamabad has responded in kind. It has launched a brutal campaign of deportations against Afghan refugees, many of whom have lived in the country for years, even decades. Last February, after a series of terrorist attacks, Islamabad closed its border with Afghanistan for over a month, on the grounds that the attacks were orchestrated by Pakistan Taliban forces operating from inside Afghanistan.



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