

Article Analysis: Afghanistan–Pakistan Tensions and Who Benefits from the Conflict?

Author: Dr. SAYED YAQOOB EMAD
(Assistant Professor/Lecturer)



Abstract

This paper examines the enduring tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan and investigates the question: *Who benefits from a potential war between these two neighbouring states?* Drawing upon historical, geopolitical, and cultural analyses, the study explores critical issues such as the Durand Line dispute, water resource management, militant activity, India's influence, and Pakistan's strategic depth doctrine. The research argues that sustained conflict serves the interests of external actors and non-state groups rather than the Afghan or Pakistani populations. The roadmap emphasizes that sustainable peace requires cultural empathy, shared sovereignty, and regional cooperation mediated by trusted partners such as Türkiye and Qatar.

Introduction

The Afghanistan–Pakistan relationship has historically oscillated between periods of cautious engagement and mutual suspicion. Since Pakistan's independence in 1947, both nations have pursued competing visions of sovereignty, security, and identity. Their shared connection – the Durand Line – remains a lingering colonial legacy that continues to shape political discourse and strategic anxiety on both sides. The question that guides this inquiry – *Who benefits from an Afghanistan–Pakistan war?* – reveals an unsettling reality: while the two countries bear the costs of insecurity, and external actors.

Historical Context: The Durand Line and the Legacy of Division

The Durand Line Agreement of 1893, signed between Sir Mortimer Durand of British India and Amir Abdur Rahman Khan of Afghanistan, drew an arbitrary boundary dividing ethnic Pashtun populations. Following the creation of Pakistan, Kabul refused to recognize the Durand Line as an international border, considering it a symbol of colonial injustice. Pakistan, however, views the matter as settled under international law.



This unresolved issue has continuously fuelled distrust. Both nations have historically supported proxy groups to exert influence across the border, perpetuating cycles of retaliation. During the Soviet–Afghan War, Pakistan's security establishment became a conduit for Western aid to Afghan mujahideen, embedding the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) deeply in Afghan affairs. Conversely, post-2001, Afghanistan's intelligence networks were accused of tolerating anti-Pakistan militant factions such as TTPs.

Competing Expectations and the Politics of Reciprocity

Afghanistan and Pakistan approach bilateral peace with asymmetrical expectations:

- **Afghanistan's expectations:**

1. Revisiting or removing the Durand Line.
2. Preventing mass deportation of Afghan refugees.
3. Preventing any party from using Pakistan's territory or airspace to conduct drone strikes in Afghanistan.

- **Pakistan's expectations:**

1. The dismantling of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) safe havens.
2. Limiting Afghanistan's strategic cooperation with India.
3. Allowing free and consistent water flow into Pakistan's agricultural basins.

These reciprocal demands expose divergent threat perceptions and competing priorities. Each state views the other's security agenda as a direct threat to its own sovereignty.

The Roots of Conflict

The Durand Line Dispute

The Durand Line remains both a territorial and psychological barrier. Afghanistan's demand to revise or annul the line is tied to notions of national dignity. Pakistan insists on maintaining the colonial demarcation for geopolitical

stability. A **bilateral referendum** or mediated negotiation could offer a peaceful resolution.

Water Resource Rivalries

Afghanistan's dam-building initiatives have heightened Pakistan's concerns over agricultural water shortages. Water politics increasingly resemble a **hydro-diplomatic challenge** requiring joint river management frameworks, similar to the **Indus Waters Treaty** between India and Pakistan.

Political leverage (TTP vs Daish)

The matter of the TTP remains a flashpoint between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Rooted in the transnational Afghan tribal belt, Afghan reluctance to restrict them is linked to traditional codes of hospitality (melmastia) and social cohesion. Consequently, Pakistan's security fears are reinforced with every attack by TTP. Pakistan blames Afghanistan for providing sanctuaries for TTP. Afghanistan denies such allegations and asking Pakistan to not blame other country for their own failures. Meanwhile, Afghanistan warning Pakistan not to train and fund some groups against Afghanistan. They both using this tactic of political leverage.

India's Strategic Influence

Former India's partnership with Karzai/Ghani administration – in infrastructure, education, and defence training – is perceived by Pakistan through the prism of its **strategic depth doctrine**. According to a 2010 BBC report, Pakistan's military viewed Afghan territory as a buffer zone in the event of an Indian invasion. This perception undermines Afghan sovereignty and exacerbates the regional rivalry. India's silent advantage lies in a divided neighbourhood where its rivals remain preoccupied with each other's instability.

Refugees, Leverage, and Humanitarian Ethics

Afghan refugees, who have resided in Pakistan for decades, constitute both a humanitarian challenge and a diplomatic tool. Periodic threats of deportation are used as political leverage. However, from a socio-economic perspective, these refugees also represent **soft power assets** capable of strengthening bilateral understanding through commerce, education, and cross-line kinship.

Who Benefits from Conflict?

Neither Afghanistan nor Pakistan benefits from war. Economic degradation, displacement, and violations are the predictable outcomes. The **true beneficiaries** are external powers that exploit regional chaos for strategic gain. From a realist perspective, conflict serves the **security interests of third-party actors**, especially those seeking to curtail regional integration projects such as the Central Asia–South Asia connectivity initiatives.

Roadmap Resolution

The Afghanistan–Pakistan conflict epitomizes the dangers of historical grievances and zero-sum geopolitics. Mutual suspicion, ideological rigidity, and foreign manipulation have kept both nations hostage to the past. The path forward lies in replacing the “big brother–small brother” narrative with one of **mutual respect and partnership**. In this spirit, a concrete first step would be the facilitation of a two-day dialogue between esteemed Afghan intellectuals and representatives of Pakistani civil society, allow both peoples to voice their shared desire for peace, build mutual understanding, and create a unified call to their respective governments to pursue a comprehensive and lasting peace resolution. To strengthen Afghan–Pakistani people-to-people relations by promoting educational, cultural, and economic exchange; fostering inclusive dialogue at all social levels; and

institutionalizing cooperation that benefits ordinary citizens across both nations.

Nation to Nation gathering initiative can transform the current fragile situation into a lasting peace. For instance, on (Economic and Strategic Interdependence); Afghanistan relies heavily on Pakistani ports for access to global markets; Pakistan depends on Afghan transit routes to reach Central Asia -2- (Labour Entrepreneurship): Afghan refugees and traders have contributed to Pakistan’s economy, while Pakistani professionals have long been active in Afghan education, construction, and health sectors, and -3- (Energy and Connectivity): Joint projects like CASA-1000 and TAPI could redefine the region’s economic geography if pursued with trust and transparency.

By fostering cultural empathy, sharing resources equitably, and engaging in sustained dialogue – ideally with facilitation from neutral mediators – the two countries can transform their rivalry into a regional model for post-conflict reconciliation. The alternative is perpetual instability that benefits everyone except the Afghan and Pakistani people.

The Role of External Mediators

Regional mediators such as Türkiye and Qatar possess the credibility to facilitate dialogue between Kabul and Islamabad. Both enjoy diplomatic trust rooted in neutrality and shared Islamic identity. The establishment of a Council of Goodwill (Husn-niyet Council) comprising respected scholars, academics, elders, and statesmen, alongside with Pakistani deep state individuals, supported by Türkiye and Qatar could institutionalize trust and safeguard any prospective peace agreement.

**Disclaimer**

The views and assessments expressed in this article are solely those of the author. Ostim Technical University Strategic Research Center (SAM) is not responsible for the opinions and content expressed in the article.



* **Dr. Sayed Yaqoob Emad** specialises in the intersections of History, International Relations, Law, and Politics. Fluent in five languages, he conducts multilingual, archival, and qualitative research on Islamic charities and Afghan society. His academic and teaching experience spans leading universities, complemented by international research collaborations and community leadership. His work reflects a strong commitment to cross-cultural inquiry and public engagement.

