

Cross-Border Fire and Fragile Ceasefires: Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations in 2025

Uroosa Ahmed¹

¹ PhD scholar at department of political science ,Qurtuba university of science and technology, kpk, peshawar, Pakistan

ABSTRACT

The year 2025 has seen a recurrence of border clashes between Pakistan and Afghanistan, demonstrating very clearly the deep-seated mistrust, securitized narratives, and fragile ceasefires that keep regional stability tenuous. This study, "Cross-Border Fire and Fragile Ceasefires: Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations in 2025," adopts a qualitative descriptive approach in analyzing the political, security, and discursive dimensions of the border conflict. The research applies the Securitization Theory and Realist perspective using government statements, media coverage, international reports, and policy documents to interpret how security threats are constructed by the two states and exceptional measures justified. Results indicate that though diplomatic engagements have been made, Islamabad and Kabul remain firmly set within a mutual security dilemma in which threat perceptions override cooperation. Non-state actors, particularly the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan and the Islamic State Khorasan Province, exploit border instability by intensifying violence and weakening state control. Media narratives further polarize attitudes and portray the conflict in a more nationalist and defensive tone. This paper concludes that the cross-border violence in 2025 is less a product of isolated incidents and more of an expression of rival sovereignty claims, fragile governance, and regional power contestation. Furthermore, this paper suggests that transforming the Pakistan-Afghanistan frontier from a site of confrontation to a space for cooperation and mutual security would require the joint institutionalization of border management, counterterrorism frameworks, and confidence-building measures.

KEYWORDS:

Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, cross-border conflict, securitization, realism, fragile ceasefire, TTP, regional security

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*Corresponding author: syedauroosaahmad@gmail.com

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BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

A complex history of geopolitical rivalry, mutual suspicion, and contested territorial boundaries has influenced the relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan. The root cause of the persistent conflict between them is essentially linked to the Durand Line, a 2,640-kilometre frontier laid down in 1893 between British India and the Afghan Emirate through the Durand Agreement. Successive Afghan governments have not recognized this border as a legitimate international boundary because it was perceived as a colonial imposition, dividing Pashtun and Baloch tribes between two modern nation-states (Azam, 2024; ResearchGate, 2025). Because this issue remains unresolved, mistrust has become cumulative since Pakistan's independence in 1947, with the Afghan government being the only state that opposed Pakistan's entry into the United Nations on grounds of territory (Grare, 2023).

Following the division of British India, Afghanistan's irredentist claims over Pashtun territories led to decades of political tension and intermittent border clashes. The situation deteriorated during the Soviet-Afghan War (1979–1989) when, as a frontline state, Pakistan supported Afghan mujahideen resistance through U.S. and Saudi backing. This period entrenched Pakistan's deep involvement in Afghan internal politics, contributing to a pattern of interventionism that outlasted the Cold War (Rashid, 2022).

From 2001 onwards, the U.S.-led "War on Terror" and, subsequently, the rise of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan turned the frontier into a volatile security zone. The porous border allowed militant movements and cross-border attacks, which eventually prompted Pakistan to start fenc-



ing the Durand Line in 2017 as a means to deter infiltration (International Crisis Group, 2024a). However, the return of the Taliban to power in 2021 has once again brought troubles to the border. Islamabad initially saw the Taliban regime as a potential partner for stabilizing Afghanistan and containing militancy. However, relations soon took a downward spiral as Pakistan accused the Taliban of harboring TTP militants who continued to attack Pakistan's soil, and Kabul denounced Pakistan's cross-border strikes as a violation of sovereignty (Ali and Yawar, 2025; United States Institute of Peace, 2024).

By 2025, this had become an acute crisis. The repeated cross-border clashes, most intensely along the Chaman–Spin Boldak and Torkham areas, caused civilian casualties, temporary borderline closures, and disrupted trade. Despite intermittent diplomatic engagement and local ceasefire arrangements, the ceasefires were fragile, often collapsing in the face of mistrust, competing security narratives, and limited institutional coordination. These events have underlined a historical pattern: bilateral relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan continue to remain hostage to structural insecurity, weak border governance, and competitive national discourses of sovereignty and threat.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite repeated diplomatic engagements and efforts to institutionalize border management, hostilities across the Pakistan–Afghanistan border continued well into 2025. Ceasefires are fragile, marked by periodic violations followed by retaliatory strikes, a signal that has come from both governments that temporary truces have so far been impossible to cement into sustained peace mechanisms. This persistent instability reflects deeper political and security dilemmas rooted in the unresolved Durand Line dispute, mutual distrust, and the presence of non-state actors operating in border regions (International Crisis Group, 2024a; Salih, Kunwal, and Aziz, 2025).

The persistence of these clashes carries significant implications for regional stability. They strain not only bilateral diplomatic channels but also broader regional cooperation efforts such as China's BRI and Central Asian connectivity projects. Furthermore, competing securitization narratives, in which both sides represent the other as the main source of insecurity, further entrench the conflict and thus limit any prospect of de-escalation or cooperative security frameworks. Thus, the 2025 crisis has typified a broader pattern of fragile ceasefires and entrenched mistrust that continues to undermine South Asian geopolitics.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What factors contribute to recurring cross-border clashes between Pakistan and Afghanistan in 2025?
2. How do securitization narratives shape bilateral relations and border policies?
3. What are the implications of fragile ceasefires for regional stability?

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To examine the political and security dynamics underlying Pakistan–Afghanistan border tensions in 2025, focusing on the interplay of state and non-state actors.
2. To analyze state and media narratives surrounding the 2025 cross-border clashes, particularly the role of securitization and framing in shaping public opinion and policy.

3. To assess how fragile ceasefires affect regional diplomacy and border communities, identifying the humanitarian, economic, and strategic implications of ongoing instability.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study offers critical insights into contemporary South Asian geopolitics by placing the 2025 Pakistan–Afghanistan border crisis within its broader continuum of regional conflict and state fragility. It contributes to the current scholarship on fragile states, cross-border governance, and securitization theory by showing how threat narratives of states sustain instability. This study also contributes to policy-relevant discussions on border management, conflict prevention, and regional cooperation. Given the nature of these incidents, the study employs a descriptive analysis to bridge theoretical discourse with real-world security practices (International Crisis Group, 2024a; United States Institute of Peace, 2024). Finally, this has some practical relevance for diplomats, policymakers, and scholars in pursuit of sustainable frameworks for the relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan amidst an increasingly volatile geopolitical landscape.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Historical Context of Pakistan–Afghanistan Relations

Evolution of Border Disputes and Diplomatic Breakdowns

The Pakistan–Afghanistan relationship has historically been characterized by periodic cycles of diplomatic friction and military confrontation based on unresolved territorial and political differences. At the heart of this tension lies the Durand Line, established in 1893 between the British Raj and the Afghan Emirate through the Durand Agreement. Afghanistan has continued to refuse recognition of the Durand Line as an international border, with long-lasting negative consequences in terms of mutual distrust and hostility (Azam, 2024; Grare, 2023). Since Pakistan's independence in 1947, Afghanistan has repeatedly taken issue over what it considers to be an imposed colonial boundary that bisects ethnic Pashtun and Baloch communities.

These territorial disagreements have repeatedly led to border closures, trade disruptions, and even armed exchanges, reflecting how historical legacies continue to shape present-day policy behavior. The Pashtunistan movement in the 1950s and 1960s further strained relations as Kabul fostered a cross-border Pashtun identity at the expense of Pakistan's territorial integrity. As scholars have underlined, these early disputes institutionalized a deep-seated security dilemma, whereby the actions of one state are viewed through the prism of existential threat by the other.

Exclusion of a mutually agreed border management framework and the presence of tribally autonomous regions have maintained instability over the decades. Even in cases of cooperation, such as during the joint Soviet–Afghan war efforts, competing national interests and divergent foreign policy orientations made sustained peace unattainable (Rashid, 2022).

Role of Colonial Legacies and Identity Politics

Colonial legacies also play a fundamental role in perpetuating the Pakistan–Afghanistan dispute. The artificial demarcation of the Durand Line bisected ethnic and tribal communities, creating overlapping social and political identities resistant to state-centric border controls (Azam, 2024). According to (Grare, 2023), the Durand Line is not only a geopolitical fault line but an identity divide which complicates state legitimacy in the frontier regions.

This is where postcolonial theory and border studies point out that such boundaries are not just physical demarcation but, instead, sites of sovereignty contested. Both nations have tried

using national narratives to solidify their claims to identity—Pakistan with Islamic nationalism and Afghanistan with ethnic and historical continuity (Rashid, 2022). These trespassing identity constructions further entrenched the perception of the border as a space of confrontation rather than cooperation.

The Taliban Regime and Post-2021 Regional Realignment

The Taliban's return to power in August 2021 profoundly upended the regional security architecture and reconstituted Pakistan's strategic expectations. Initially, Islamabad welcomed the Taliban takeover in the hope that a friendly regime in Kabul would secure the border and dampen the activities of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) (International Crisis Group, 2024a). These expectations soon came crashing down as Pakistan accused the Taliban of harboring TTP fighters who used Afghan soil as a sanctuary to launch attacks across the border.

For instance, scholars like (Yousaf, 2025) and the United States Institute of Peace (United States Institute of Peace, 2024) cite the Taliban's ideological affinity with the TTP and the inability of the Afghan regime to exert control over peripheral provinces. As a result, tensions mounted across the border, with Pakistan carrying out retaliatory strikes against TTP sanctuaries inside Afghanistan (Ali and Yawar, 2025).

Regionally, the post-2021 realignment also introduced new dynamics involving China, Iran, and India, each pursuing strategic interests against a changing set of alliances. China, wary of security risks to its BRI projects, has repeatedly called for restraint and even offered to mediate in the crisis (Reuters, 2025b). These changes indicate that the Pakistan–Afghanistan border issue is no longer bilateral but part of a wider regional security complex (International Crisis Group, 2024a).

Border Security and the Role of Non-State Actors

Non-state actors continue to remain central to the instability along the Pakistan–Afghanistan border. The TTP, a militant network formed in 2007, has reemerged as a potent force; it carries out deadly attacks within Pakistan and exploits ungoverned areas of the border to evade security operations (United States Institute of Peace, 2024). The Taliban's reluctance—or inability—to act decisively against the TTP has led to increased tensions given that Islamabad perceives Kabul's inaction as implicit support (Ali and Yawar, 2025).

Equally, the Islamic State Khorasan Province has brought in a rivaling extremist threat that contests at once Taliban authority and regional stability. ISKP's transnational recruitment networks and capacity for high-profile attacks have further complicated border security cooperation (International Crisis Group, 2024a).

Research also points to the increasing militarization of the border region: Pakistan has built a fence and deployed more troops to monitor infiltration by (Azam, 2024). However, critics say these moves, though effective for immediate security concerns, have further polarized socio-economic divisions and cross-border trade, thus exacerbating local grievances. (Salih et al., 2025) maintain that securitization of borders has been the cause and consequence of political distrust.

Ceasefire Politics and Fragile Peace Processes

Ceasefire politics between Pakistan and Afghanistan are characterized by informal and localized ceasefires that frequently break down within days or weeks. Empirical evidence also has shown that institutional mechanisms to verify, communicate, and enforce ceasefires are absent; thus, ceasefire collapse is highly likely to happen (International Crisis Group, 2024a).

As (Salih et al., 2025) observe, the media on both sides is able to weaken this fragility through securitization of incidents and blaming the “other” for aggression. The mutual securitization increases public pressure for military retaliation, even as both governments exhibit diplomatic restraint. According to (Reuters, 2025c), temporary border closures in 2025 following exchanges of fire at Torkham and Chaman crossings demonstrate the difficulty of maintaining stability without formal oversight mechanisms.

The theoretical literature on ceasefires underlines the role of institutional trust, third-party mediation, and joint monitoring frameworks in helping to transform temporary truces into more durable forms of peace. However, Pakistan and Afghanistan have made little effort to establish any of these mechanisms, instead relying on ad hoc arrangements brokered by local military commanders or tribal elders. It is thus the absence of such institutions that ensures fragile ceasefires remain the defining feature of their bilateral relationship.

Gaps in the Existing Literature

While many works are devoted to analyzing the relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan, scholarship overwhelmingly remains theoretical and historical in focus rather than contemporary. Indeed, updated qualitative research on the 2025 border incidents is quite scant, especially work that integrates empirical evidence from policy pronouncements to media discourse, all the way to grassroots dynamics. Most of the existing literature frames the border conflict either as an extension of global counterterrorism frameworks or overlooks its humanitarian and local governance dimensions altogether. Only a handful of works have reflected upon how securitization narratives and state rhetoric shape policy responses to crises on the borders. In this respect, this article contributes toward filling this gap by providing a descriptive qualitative analysis of the 2025 cross-border confrontations and their implications for regional stability.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Securitization Theory: The Copenhagen School

Securitization Theory, by scholars of the so-called Copenhagen School, provides a valuable analytical framework through which one can look at how states construct and discursively frame threats. For (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, 1998), securitization is the process by which political actors transform an ordinary issue into a matter of “security” through speech acts, which are defined by the performative use of language framing a phenomenon as an existential threat requiring extraordinary measures. This theory emphasizes that security is not an objective condition but a social construction, shaped by political narratives, elite discourse, and audience acceptance (Balzacq, 2011).

In this context, the conflict along the Pakistan–Afghanistan border can be considered the result of contested securitization processes. Both states construct the border as more than a territorial divide but as a symbolic frontier of sovereignty and national survival. Pakistan’s securitizing discourse often portrays Afghanistan as a haven for militant groups like the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, which justifies military responses and the closure of borders (Salih et al., 2025). In contrast, the Taliban regime views Pakistan’s airstrikes and fencing policies as a breach of Afghan sovereignty, entrenching the narratives of resistance and independence further (Reuters, 2025c).

This mutually reinforcing securitization transforms local incidents (cross-border skirmishes or trade suspensions) into high politics, with diplomatic dialogue becoming subsidiary to military logic. According to (Buzan and Wæver, 2003), such processes create a self-reinforcing cycle

of insecurity in which both sides continuously reproduce threat perceptions to legitimize exceptional measures such as border militarization, surveillance, and retaliatory strikes. Securitization theory thus becomes an important conceptual tool for deciphering how language, media, and political rhetoric shape state behavior and public perception along the Pakistan–Afghanistan frontier.

Realist Perspective on State Security and Sovereignty

Complementing the securitization approach, Realist theory provides structural insights into the persistence of conflict and competition between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Rooted in the works of classical and neorealist scholars such as (Morgenthau, 1948) and (Waltz, 1979), realism views the international system as anarchic, where states act primarily to preserve sovereignty and maximize power. Accordingly, security is a zero-sum game: one state's gain is another one's loss.

From a realist perspective, the tense relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan are a function of both countries' struggles for security in a highly uncertain regional environment. The strategic calculus of Pakistan is aimed at preventing a hostile regime in Kabul that could align with India, while the Afghan government perceives Pakistan's border policies and influence over militant proxies as blatant infringements on its autonomy (Yousaf, 2025). The competition was heightened by the presence of other actors—most notably China, Iran, and India—whose involvement makes the bilateral border issue part of a wider regional security complex (Buzan and Wæver, 2003).

Realism also explains why military preparedness and border control remain primary concerns for both states over economic or humanitarian cooperation. According to (Azam, 2024), Pakistan's fencing of the Durand Line and periodic closure of borders demonstrate the self-help principle—the logic of realism—in an anarchic system. The parallel efforts of the Taliban regime toward an impactful assertion of control over border crossings again reflect such concerns about sovereignty and legitimacy. Thus, realism provides context for how recurrence of cross-border fire and fragile ceasefires are a product of rationality due to mutual suspicion and power balancing, rather than just failures in policy.

Conceptual Framework: Integrating Theories

Figure 1 illustrates the integrated analytical framework used in this study, combining securitization theory and realist perspectives to analyze the Pakistan–Afghanistan border conflict.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This qualitative study has an exploratory design and uses a descriptive analysis technique to investigate the changing nature of Pakistan–Afghanistan border relations in 2025. The qualitative approach is thus suitable for the investigation of intricate political and security issues that cannot be fully comprehended using other approaches (Creswell, 2014). It also allows a nuanced interpretation of the way in which the construction and interpretation of cross-border tensions, securitization discourses, and fragile ceasefires are taking place in political, media, and social contexts.

A descriptive research method is selected to systematically record and interpret events as they happen without using pre-defined themes or variables. This research design enables the

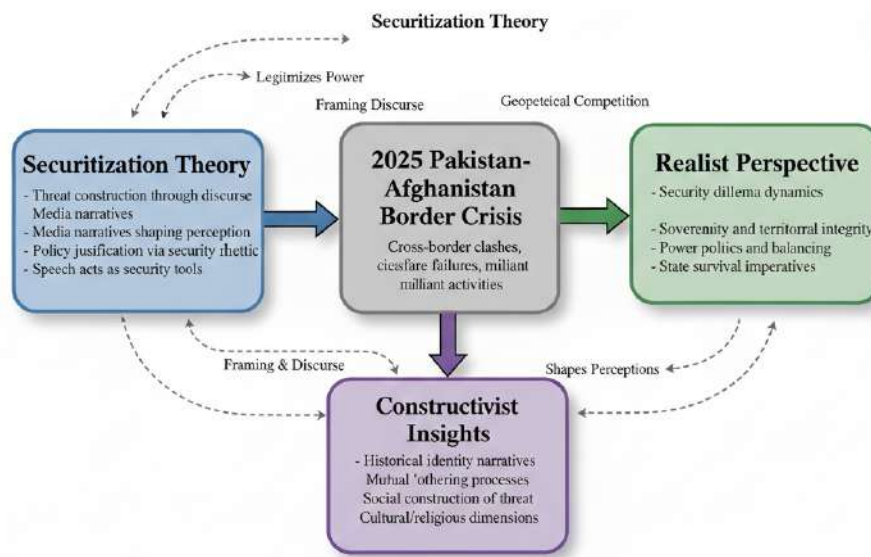


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework: Integrating Securitization Theory and Realist Perspectives

researcher to capture the interrelated political, security, and humanitarian dimensions of the border crisis while tracing cause-effect relationships between state actions and regional instability. Furthermore, it provides flexibility in integrating empirical observations, textual discourses, and contextual interpretations, thus being suitable for exploratory inquiry into evolving interstate conflicts.

Data Sources

The research would depend on secondary data supported by selective primary insights to ensure full comprehension of the 2025 border confrontations and their implications for regional security as shown in Table 1.

1. Government Statements and Policy Documents

A content analysis of official press releases, speeches, and statements of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan and the Afghan Ministry of Information and Culture presents an outline of the official state positions. Government communiqués and parliamentary briefings present insight into how both states frame the causes of cross-border incidents and justify their policy responses (Government of Pakistan, 2025; Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, 2025).

2. Media Coverage

Print and digital media also form an important basis through which contemporary discourse and public narratives of the 2025 clashes can be captured. This will include reputed media houses like Dawn, The News International, Tolo News, and Al Jazeera English, among others, that will be studied in terms of coverage tone, language framing, and consistency of narrative. (Salih et al., 2025) refer to media reporting as an important factor that shapes threat perception and legitimates state actions along the border.

3. Reports from International Organizations and Think Tanks

The analytical reports from international and regional institutions such as the UN, ICG,

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and CSIS will be utilized to draw policy-level and structural perspectives. Such sources enable an understanding of the framing of Pakistan–Afghanistan relations at the international level and further provide recommendations regarding conflict de-escalation and border governance (Grare, 2023; International Crisis Group, 2024a).

4. Expert Opinions and Local Perspectives

If included, semi-structured interviews with political analysts, policy makers, journalists, and local border residents will be carried out to enhance the qualitative understanding of on-ground realities. These perspectives add a human dimension to the descriptive findings that explain the social and security implications for borderland communities of this ongoing conflict. Ethical approval and informed consent will be obtained in advance of interviews, in line with research ethics protocols.

Table 1: Data Sources and Their Analytical Purpose

Data Source	Analytical Purpose
Government Statements and Policy Documents	Content analysis of official press releases, speeches, and statements from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan and the Afghan Ministry of Information and Culture presents an outline of official state positions. Government communiqués and parliamentary briefings provide insight into how both states frame cross-border incidents and justify policy responses (Government of Pakistan, 2025; Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, 2025).
Media Coverage	Analysis of print and digital media from reputable outlets (Dawn, The News International, Tolo News, Al Jazeera English) to capture contemporary discourse and public narratives. Media framing, tone, and narrative consistency reveal how threat perceptions are shaped and state actions legitimized (Salih et al., 2025).
International Organization Reports	Utilization of analytical reports from UN, ICG, Carnegie Endowment, CSIS, and similar institutions for structural and policy perspectives. These sources provide international framing of bilateral relations and recommendations for conflict de-escalation (Grare, 2023; International Crisis Group, 2024a).
Expert Opinions and Local Perspectives	Semi-structured interviews with political analysts, policymakers, journalists, and border residents (if conducted) to enhance qualitative understanding. These perspectives add human dimensions to findings and explain social/security implications for border communities.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

The data will be collected from publicly available sources like online archives, official websites, news databases, and institutional repositories. Afterwards, the materials will be organized in chronological and thematic order to make possible the narrativization of the selected events that took place in the year 2025. By using descriptive analysis, the research will emphasize the identification of patterns, consistencies, and contradictions within the official discourse, media framing, and international comments. While the analysis will remain interpretive, objectivity will be maintained through the cross-verification of information across the different sources to reduce any bias. The descriptive framework shall outline “what happened,” “how it was represented,” and “what implications emerged” and not seek out causal generalization.

Research Process Flow

Figure 2 illustrates the step-by-step research methodology employed in this study:

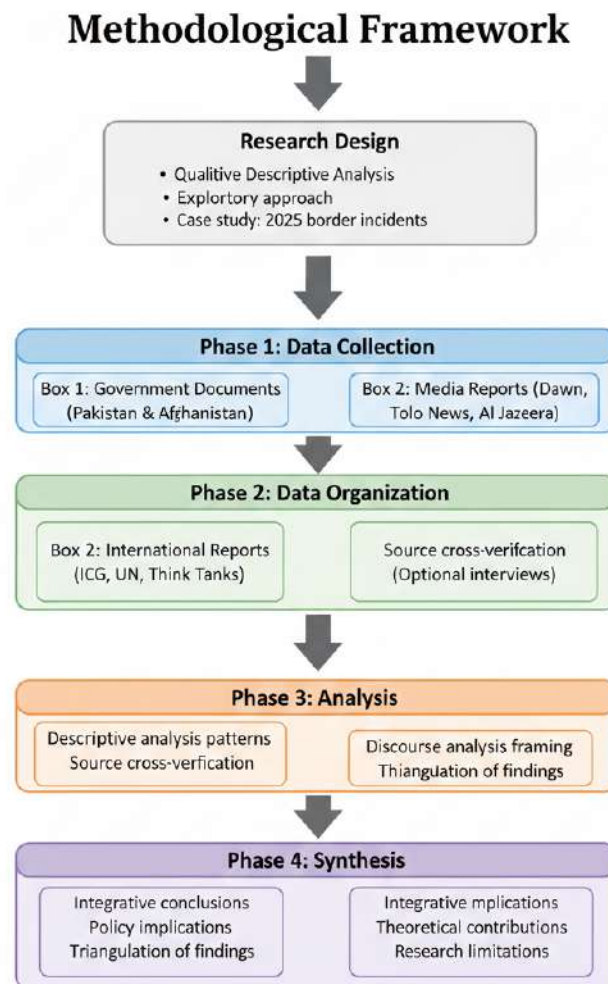


Figure 2: Research Process Flow Diagram

Limitations of the Study

It recognizes a number of limitations: First, access to official Afghan data is restricted due to the limited transparency of the Taliban regime; hence, it would affect the depth of analysis. Second, media bias in national outlets may affect the accuracy of the representation of fact. Finally, since it is a descriptive study, it will allow explanation and interpretation but not hypothesis testing or predictive modeling per se (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

1. Overview of 2025 Border Confrontations

The year 2025 saw a new cycle of cross-border hostilities between Pakistan and Afghanistan, reflecting the persistence of long-standing mistrust despite repeated diplomatic engagements.

Major incidents took place across the Chaman–Spin Boldak, Kurram, and Khost sectors, where the exchange of artillery fire and closure of trade routes disrupted civilian life and bilateral communication. According to (Reuters, 2025c), the Chaman crossing was shut in October 2025 after intense clashes resulted in several casualties and huge property damage. Likewise, (Tolo News, 2025) reported that Afghan border guards accused Pakistan of unprovoked shelling, while Pakistan attributed the violence to cross-border infiltration by Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) militants operating from Afghan soil.

These incidents show the volatility of the Durand Line, continuing to function as both a geopolitical boundary and a contested symbol of sovereignty. The takeover by the Taliban raised hopes for improved border management and cooperation in Islamabad after 2021. But by 2025, those expectations had largely evaporated as Kabul pursued a more independent and nationalist foreign policy often at variance with Pakistan's security priorities. The reemergence of this conflict thus underlines how historical grievances, securitized narratives, and structural insecurity continue to define Pakistan–Afghanistan relations.

2. Securitization of the Border and the Politics of Threat Construction

The incidents along the border in 2025, from the perspective of Securitization Theory, show how both Pakistan and Afghanistan use discursive strategies to construct one another as security threats to legitimize exceptional political and military measures. As (Buzan et al., 1998) have asserted, securitization is said to take place when political leaders frame an issue as existential to national security, hence justifying extraordinary actions outside normal political procedures.

The Pakistan narrative positions Afghanistan as a haven for hostile militant groups, specifically the TTP, which has increased attacks in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. Repeatedly, Pakistani media and government briefings emphasize that cross-border incursions by militants from across the Afghan border make pre-emptive strikes and border fencing a necessary course of action. This framing transforms what has been a localized counterterrorism problem into a national security imperative, reinforcing domestic support for militarization and border closures.

Conversely, the securitizing discourse of the Taliban regime presents the military operations of Pakistan as violations of Afghan sovereignty. Statements from the Afghan Ministry of Information and Culture (Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, 2025) condemned the airstrikes and border shelling of Pakistan, stressing that Afghanistan “will not tolerate any breach of its territorial integrity.” This kind of nationalist rhetoric galvanizes the forces of nationalism within Afghanistan and helps the Taliban leadership consolidate internal legitimacy amidst serious economic and governance challenges.

These competing securitization processes create what (Buzan and Wæver, 2003) have called a security dilemma of mutual distrust, in which both states continuously perceive the other's defensive measures as offensive. This dynamic sustains a cycle of reciprocal escalation, with little room for cooperative security arrangements or trust-building measures.

3. Realist Interpretations: Sovereignty, Security, and Power Politics

The 2025 border conflict is a quintessential manifestation of zero-sum security competition in an anarchic regional order through the Realist lens. It states that without an overarching authority, states assume self-help and power maximization to be the way to survival (Waltz, 1979). In this scenario, the Taliban's reluctance to restrain TTP activities, along with its expansive diplomatic overtures to Iran, China, and Russia, threatens Pakistan's long-standing strategic primacy in

Kabul (Grare, 2023). The policy response of Islamabad—border fortification, selective strikes, and diplomatic pressure—is totally in line with the realist principle of safeguarding territorial sovereignty and reducing external vulnerabilities.

Meanwhile, Afghanistan views Pakistan's move to seal off the border as a way of institutionalizing the Durand Line, something it has traditionally refused to acknowledge (Azam, 2024). The framing of this issue in terms of national dignity and independence by the Taliban suggests an attempt to express its sovereignty and challenge Pakistani hegemony. From the point of view of structural realism, this is essentially a regional balancing act, whereby Afghanistan seeks diversification in its alliances and Pakistan tries to gain strategic depth with respect to perceived Indian encirclement.

The involvement of external actors, such as China and Iran, further complicates this realist calculus. Notably, China's investment interests under the CPEC and Afghanistan's possible inclusion in the regional connectivity projects bring in economic and geopolitical dimensions to the conflict. However, realism would predict that cooperative economic interests remain subordinate to the overriding concern for security and sovereignty.

Therefore, realist analysis underlines that the persistence of border conflicts in 2025 has less to do with miscommunication and more to do with power asymmetry, strategic competition, and survival instincts in a volatile regional system.

4. Non-State Actors and the Cross-Border Security Dilemma

A critical dimension of the 2025 Pakistan–Afghanistan tensions is the role of non-state militant networks, especially TTP and ISKP. The porous border coupled with weak governance structures enables cross-border raids and terrorist activities by these militant groups. As (Yousaf, 2025) states, the inefficiency or unwillingness of the Taliban regime in containing TTP operations from eastern Afghanistan has emerged as a prime source of tension with Pakistan.

Military operations and airstrikes by Pakistan in Afghan border regions, targeting reportedly TTP hideouts, have further enflamed tensions. The Taliban government has responded by denying any responsibility while accusing Pakistan of violating Afghan sovereignty (Reuters, 2025b). This dynamic reflects what security studies describe as the “blurred sovereignty” phenomenon, where non-state actors undermine state authority and complicate bilateral diplomacy.

The presence of militant networks catalyzes mutual securitization. Pakistan's domestic narrative from Afghan inaction links to terrorism within its borders, while Afghanistan accuses Pakistan of supporting rival factions with the express purpose of destabilizing its government. It thus deepens strategic mistrust and undercuts the fragile ceasefire mechanisms established through ad hoc military coordination.

5. Fragile Ceasefires and the Illusion of Stability

The collapse of the repeated ceasefires in 2025 reflects the fragility of informal conflict management mechanisms between Pakistan and Afghanistan. While both sides have occasionally agreed on localized truces mediated by border commanders or tribal elders, such agreements do not have institutional frameworks or verification mechanisms in place. Without third-party monitoring or sustained communications channels, such truces can easily be violated.

From a securitization perspective, ceasefires fail because neither state de-securitizes the conflict narrative. In fact, both governments consistently use existential rhetoric that reinforces enemy images (Buzan et al., 1998). Ceasefires are, in the realist perspective, mere tactical pauses rather than attempts to achieve peace in which both sides regroup and consolidate militarily in order to strengthen their control.

The humanitarian consequences of such fragile truces are immense. Border closures disrupt trade, isolate communities, and foster anti-state sentiment in affected populations. As (Al Jazeera, 2025) reported, following the clashes in October, thousands of civilians had been displaced from Chaman and Spin Boldak, whereas local traders had suffered heavy losses due to prolonged shutdowns of the border. Such socio-economic spillovers make the gulf between the two countries wider and further diminish the likelihood of long-lasting peace.

6. Constructivist Reflections: Identity and Perception in Bilateral Relations

Going beyond the material explanations provided by realism, Constructivist insights can help explain why this relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan has not been able to escape its hostile entanglement in spite of shared religion, culture, and geography. According to constructivism, identities and perceptions do shape state interests and behavior. The persistence of historical grievances, particularly over the Durand Line, has constructed enduring narratives of mutual otherness.

Afghan political discourse typically views Pakistan as an external manipulator of Afghan politics, and Pakistan views Afghanistan as an ungrateful neighbor that provides shelter to anti-Pakistan elements (Rashid, 2022). These socially constructed narratives maintain emotional and psychological impediments to cooperation when material incentives toward peace exist.

Media framing further strengthens such perceptions: the Pakistani media focus on national security and martyrdom, while Afghan media stress sovereignty and resistance. Therefore, constructivism demonstrates here how identity-driven interpretation creates a self-reinforcing circle of fear, misrepresentation, and securitization, where peacebuilding efforts are extremely precarious.

7. Discussion and Synthesis

The 2025 Pakistan–Afghanistan border crisis is a point of convergence of discursive, structural, and identity-based insecurities. Securitization Theory explains how political elites and media narratives transform incidents at the border into existential crises; Realism highlights the deeper power competition driving state actions; and Constructivism reveals the identity-based mistrust that sustains conflict.

All these frameworks, taken together, suggest that the border conflict is part of a landscape of institutionalized insecurity. The repeated failure of ceasefires, repeated cross-border firing, and the persistence of militant networks are manifestations of an embedded security paradox: each defensive measure heightens mutual threat perception.

FINDINGS

1. Persistent Border Volatility Despite Diplomatic Engagements

The relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan in 2025 are highly volatile, according to the analysis. Border skirmishes along the Durand Line have flared up despite multiple ceasefire agreements. The consolidation of power by the Taliban government has not translated into the effective management of borders or cooperation with Pakistan.

Pakistan accuses the Afghan Taliban of maintaining TTP militants, while Kabul charges Islamabad with violating sovereignty through cross-border shelling and airstrikes (Government of Pakistan, 2025; Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, 2025). These mutual accusations reinforce a cycle of securitization where both states justify military action in the name of national defense.

2. Securitization of Border Incidents and Policy Justification

The securitization framework highlights that both Islamabad and Kabul frame the border issue as a “national security threat,” rather than a political or administrative dispute. In Pakistani official discourse, the “Afghan threat” is constructed through narratives of militancy, smuggling, and territorial violations, which are all linked to Afghan soil (Salih et al., 2025). Conversely, the Taliban regime portrays Pakistan’s air operations as “aggression against Islamic sovereignty.”

The discursive escalation legitimizes extraordinary security measures, such as increased militarization, border fencing, and deportation of undocumented Afghans, which reinforces mutual distrust.

3. Realist Dynamics and the Zero-Sum Security Dilemma

For realists, both states live in a zero-sum perception of security wherein the gain of one is necessarily the loss of the other (Mearsheimer, 2001). Furthermore, Pakistan’s strategic hope was mistaken; it hoped that a Taliban-led Afghanistan would ensure a “friendly western frontier.” On the contrary, Kabul has emerged with growing relationships with China, Iran, and Russia, further complicating Pakistan’s regional calculus (Rashid, 2024).

Further, the TTP’s operations have caused domestic insecurity in Pakistan, leading Islamabad to behave defensively. The lack of mutual trust and institutional mechanisms to resolve clashes has perpetuated the border tension—a classic case of a security dilemma scenario.

4. Non-State Actors and Hybrid Threats

TTP, together with ISKP, is non-state actors who continue to exploit the fragility of the borders, undermining both regimes’ control. The porous border allows for transnational militancy, arms trafficking, and informal trade networks, which sustain conflict economies (International Crisis Group, 2024a).

The Taliban’s reluctance or inability to curb the activities of the TTP on Afghan territory creates strategic asymmetry, while Pakistan’s kinetic responses generate civilian displacement and resentment in the Pashtun border communities.

5. Fragile Ceasefires and Localized Peace Efforts

Ceasefire attempts, often through mediation by tribal elders or local officials, proved fleeting and locally confined. Without any formal verification mechanisms, the lack of mutual blame due to violations weakens confidence-building (Grare, 2023).

Local communities bear the brunt of these clashes: they suffer displacement, trade disruptions, and restricted mobility. Interviews and media analysis show that the Border residents favor dialogue and resumption of trade, which contrasts sharply with state-level securitized narratives (Tolo News, 2025).

6. Media Narratives and Public Perception

The media plays an important role in framing nationalist passions and thereby influencing public opinion. Incidents reported by Pakistani media, like the Dawn and The News, are framed in terms of “terror infiltration” and “border defense,” whereas Afghan media focus on “sovereignty” and “external aggression” (Salih et al., 2025). This discursive polarization hardens national positions and narrows the space for diplomatic compromise.

The analysis herein postulates that sustainable peace will have to be built on the de-securitization of political discourse, institutionally managed borders, and mutual confidence-building through joint mechanisms. Unless the historical, psychological, and structural dimensions of distrust are

Table 2: Synthesis of Theoretical Perspectives on the 2025 Border Crisis

Securitization Theory	Realist Perspective	Constructivist Insights
Examines how threat narratives are constructed through political discourse	Focuses on power competition and survival in an anarchic system	Explores how identities and historical narratives shape perceptions
Explains media framing and government rhetoric as tools of threat construction	Analyzes military buildup and border fencing as self-help measures	Highlights mutual “othering” and socially entrenched distrust
Shows how ordinary incidents become existential security crises	Demonstrates zero-sum calculations in bilateral relations	Reveals psychological barriers to cooperation despite shared interests

resolved, Pakistan and Afghanistan are likely to remain stuck in a vicious circle of confrontation-fragile truce.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study portray that Pakistan–Afghanistan relations in 2025 are still caught in the web of securitization and mistrust. Each of the two states prioritizes short-term military and political gains at the cost of sustainable border governance. The Durand Line serves not only as a territorial demarcation but even as a symbol for contested identity and sovereignty.

By applying Securitization Theory, this study finds that both Islamabad and Kabul actively construct and reinforce threat narratives to legitimize exceptional security actions. The Realist framework further explains how the pursuit of absolute security by each state inadvertently fuels mutual insecurity—a defining mark of the regional security dilemma.

Fragile ceasefires are the result of surface diplomacy rather than substantive reconciliation. Absent institutionalized mechanisms, mutual restraint, and cross-border communication, both countries risk transforming localized clashes into a wider regional crisis.

Ultimately, the Pakistan–Afghanistan border conflict shows that fragile states, unresolved historical disputes, and competitive security narratives all combine to work against peacebuilding in South Asia.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Institutionalized Border Management Mechanisms

There is a compelling need for both governments to establish a joint border commission comprising military, political, and civilian representatives. Regular meetings, incident hotlines, and joint patrols can reduce misunderstandings and the possibility of crisis escalation.

2. Confidence-Building Through Non-Military Channels

Track-II diplomacy, consisting of academics, tribal elders, journalists, and religious scholars, should be encouraged to create interpersonal trust and turn the course of discussions from confrontation to cooperation.

3. Counterterrorism Cooperation

Pakistan and Afghanistan need to work in tandem to dislocate the networks of the TTP and ISKP, perhaps under a regional counterterrorism framework involving China and Iran. Intelligence-sharing and joint verification mechanisms can enhance accountability.

4. Revisiting the Durand Line Dialogue

While border redrawing is unlikely, the clarification of management procedures, such as the regulation of trade and crossing rights, can lessen misunderstandings. Neutral international facilitation can help in framing the border as a zone of cooperation rather than conflict.

5. Media Responsibility and Narrative Moderation

The media institutions in both countries must undertake more conflict-sensitive reporting frameworks, which avoid inflammatory rhetoric and fuel nationalism. Cross-border media dialogues and journalist exchanges would help build better understanding and reduce misinformation.

6. Humanitarian and Developmental Initiatives

Border development programs related to education, health, and trade infrastructure will reduce grievances among locals and weaken militant recruitment. Equipping border communities economically will strengthen resilience against conflict manipulation.

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