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Print ISSN: [3006-2497](#) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](#)Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)**Border Fencing and Diplomacy: Pakistan's Strategies toward Afghanistan and Iran****Dr. Muhammad Naveed Ul Hasan Shah**

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**ABSTRACT**

*This article examines Pakistan's significant foreign policy shift towards border hardening, manifested in the comprehensive fencing of its western frontiers with Afghanistan and Iran. For decades, these borders were characterized by a high degree of porosity, underpinning a security doctrine of "strategic depth." The recent, capital-intensive projects to erect physical barriers represent a paradigm shift in the nation's strategic calculus. The central thesis of this article is that while ostensibly similar security projects, Pakistan's bordering strategies and the associated cross-border diplomacy on the Afghan and Iranian frontiers are fundamentally divergent. The approach towards Afghanistan is characterized by unilateral securitization and diplomatic contestation rooted in historical sovereignty disputes, whereas the approach towards Iran is marked by cautious security cooperation and economic pragmatism, despite intermittent friction. Through a qualitative, comparative case study analysis of the Durand Line and the Goldsmid Line fencing projects, this article explores the drivers and implications of these divergent strategies. The analysis reveals that historical context, the specific nature of security threats, and the quality of bilateral relationships have compelled Pakistan to adopt two distinct models of border management, challenging the notion of a monolithic western border policy. This research provides a nuanced comparative analysis of a major development in South Asian geopolitics, contributing to the literature on border studies, foreign policy analysis, and regional security by deconstructing the complex interplay between physical infrastructure, national security, and international diplomacy.*

**Keywords:** Pakistan, Border Fencing, Foreign Policy, Afghanistan, Iran, Durand Line, Securitization, Border Diplomacy, Strategic Depth.

**Introduction**

For most of its existence, the state of Pakistan has lived with a geopolitical paradox on its western flank. Its borders with Afghanistan and Iran, stretching over 3,500 kilometers across some of the world's most rugged and inhospitable terrain, have been lines on a map more than realities on the ground. This historical porosity was not merely a function of geography but a feature of state policy, underpinning a security doctrine often referred to as "strategic depth" (Riedel, 2011). This doctrine, primarily aimed at countering the perceived existential threat from India, viewed

Afghanistan as a friendly hinterland, a space for strategic manoeuvre in case of an eastern conflict. Consequently, the free movement of people, goods, and ideologies across the Durand Line was, if not encouraged, tacitly accepted as a strategic asset. The border with Iran, while more formally recognized, also remained relatively soft, governed by tribal linkages and a vast informal economy that dwarfed formal trade (Sial, 2014). However, the 21st century has fundamentally challenged this paradigm. The post-9/11 landscape, the subsequent "War on Terror," and the rise of potent non-state actors operating from cross-border sanctuaries have transformed these porous frontiers from strategic assets into critical liabilities. The devastating 2014 attack on the Army Public School (APS) in Peshawar, orchestrated by the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) from sanctuaries in Afghanistan, served as a brutal catalyst for change, marking a point of no return in Pakistan's security calculus (Hussain, 2017). This event crystallized a growing consensus within the country's powerful military establishment that internal security had become paramount and that the nation's territorial integrity could no longer be left to ambiguous doctrines.

This policy pivot has manifested physically in one of the most ambitious state-building projects in Pakistan's history: the comprehensive fencing of its western borders. Beginning in earnest around 2017, the state has invested hundreds of millions of dollars to erect a formidable barrier system along the Durand Line and, subsequently, along the Goldsmid Line with Iran. This move signals a decisive shift from a strategy of regional influence to one of homeland consolidation a Westphalian turn towards hard borders and absolute sovereignty (Fair, 2019). Yet, to view these fencing projects as a uniform policy applied across the western front would be a significant oversimplification. This raises a critical research question: Why and how has Pakistan's diplomatic approach to the fencing of its borders with Afghanistan and Iran differed so markedly, despite similar stated goals of enhancing security? This article posits that the diplomacy surrounding the Durand Line fence is defined by a legacy of political contestation, historical grievance, and unilateral securitization, creating persistent friction with Kabul. In contrast, the Goldsmid Line fence with Iran is managed through a framework of pragmatic, if fragile, bilateral cooperation, driven by shared threat perceptions and mutual economic interests. To substantiate this thesis, this article proceeds in several parts. Section two provides a review of the relevant literature on border theory and Pakistan's security doctrine, establishing the theoretical and historical context. Section three outlines the qualitative comparative case study methodology employed. Sections four and five present the core of the analysis, examining the bordering strategies and diplomatic engagements on the Afghan and Iranian fronts, respectively. Section six offers a direct comparative analysis, highlighting the key points of divergence. Section seven discusses the broader implications of this policy for Pakistan's foreign policy and regional stability. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the findings and suggests avenues for future research.

### **Literature Review & Theoretical Framework**

To understand Pakistan's "tale of two fences," it is essential to situate the analysis within three intersecting bodies of literature: theories of bordering and securitization, the evolution of Pakistan's foreign and security doctrine, and the specific historical contexts of the Durand and Goldsmid Lines.

### **Theories of Bordering and Securitization**

The modern international system, born from the Peace of Westphalia, is predicated on the concept of sovereign states defined by clear, mutually recognized borders. In this classical view, borders are the unambiguous markers of a state's territorial jurisdiction, serving as the primary

line of defense and the container of national identity (Sack, 1986). The act of "hardening" a border through fences, walls, and surveillance is the ultimate expression of this state-centric view, a physical assertion of sovereignty and control. This process often involves "securitization," where an issue, such as migration or trade, is framed as an existential threat requiring extraordinary measures beyond normal political procedure (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998). Pakistan's narrative that the fence is essential to stop terrorism is a classic example of securitization, justifying a massive expenditure and the disruption of local life (Cheema, 2015). However, contemporary border studies have challenged this simplistic view, arguing that borders are not merely lines but complex social and political processes. Van Schendel (2005) describes borderlands as dynamic zones of interaction, not peripheries, where state power is contested, and local actors create their own realities through cross-border networks of kinship, trade, and smuggling. From this perspective, a fence is not just a security tool but a violent intervention that reorders social life, disrupts established economic patterns, and creates new forms of conflict (Jones, 2012). The deep resentment among Pashtun tribes divided by the Durand Line, who see the fence as an assault on their way of life, can be understood through this lens. This article employs both theoretical perspectives, viewing the fences as both a state-led securitization project and a socio-political process with complex, often unintended, consequences for borderland communities.

#### **Pakistan's Foreign Policy and Security Doctrine**

Pakistan's foreign policy has long been dominated by its security establishment and defined by a singular obsession: the rivalry with India. The doctrine of "strategic depth" was a direct outgrowth of this rivalry. As articulated by strategists like General Mirza Aslam Beg, it posited that in a war with India, Pakistan's lack of geographic depth could be compensated for by a friendly, pro-Pakistan government in Afghanistan, providing a rear base for military and political operations (Sattar, 2007). This doctrine heavily influenced Pakistan's policies during the Soviet-Afghan War and the subsequent civil war, including its support for the Taliban regime in the 1990s. A porous border was a prerequisite for this strategy to function. The post-9/11 era, however, exposed the severe downsides of this approach. The very networks and actors Pakistan had cultivated for strategic depth morphed into a direct threat to the Pakistani state itself, most notably in the form of the TTP (Fair, 2014). The TTP, while ideologically aligned with the Afghan Taliban, turned its guns on the Pakistani state, using Afghan territory as a launching pad for thousands of attacks. This forced a painful re-evaluation within the military establishment, leading to a gradual but decisive abandonment of strategic depth in favor of a new doctrine of internal consolidation and homeland security (Gregory, 2016). The decision to fence the border, therefore, represents the physical manifestation of this doctrinal shift, prioritizing the fight against internal enemies over maintaining influence in a neighboring state. The military's central role in this decision is undeniable, with the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) being the primary source of information and justification for the project (ISPR, 2017).

#### **The Durand Line and the Goldsmid Line in Historical Context**

The divergent diplomatic paths taken by Pakistan are inexplicable without understanding the vastly different histories of its two western borders. The Durand Line, a 2,670-kilometer line drawn in 1893 by British diplomat Sir Mortimer Durand and the Afghan Amir Abdur Rahman Khan, is a product of the "Great Game" between the British and Russian Empires (Dupree, 1973). From its inception, its legitimacy has been contested. Successive Afghan governments have argued that the agreement was signed under duress and had a limited validity, and most importantly, that it

unacceptably divided the large Pashtun ethnic group. No Afghan government, from the monarchy to the communists to the Taliban, has ever formally recognized the Durand Line as a permanent international border (Rashid, 2008). This historical grievance is the bedrock of Afghan opposition to the fence, which they see as a unilateral Pakistani attempt to settle the dispute by force. In stark contrast, the Pakistan-Iran border, also known as the Goldsmid Line, has a far less contentious history. Demarcated by a British commission led by Major General Frederic Goldsmid in the 1870s and finalized in subsequent agreements, its legitimacy was formally accepted by both Persia and British India. After Pakistan's independence, the two nations reaffirmed their shared border in a 1958 agreement, which included detailed mapping and demarcation (Rizvi, 2001). While the border cuts through the Baloch ethnic group, it has not produced the same level of persistent irredentist claims or official state-level rejection as the Durand Line. This foundational difference a settled, recognized border versus a contested, rejected one is a critical variable explaining why Iran can engage with Pakistan on border management as a cooperative partner, while Afghanistan views the same activity as an act of aggression.

### **Identifying the Research Gap**

While a substantial body of work exists on Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, the Durand Line dispute, and the Baloch insurgency on the Iranian border, the literature has largely treated these as separate issues. Scholarly and policy analyses have covered the fencing projects, but often from a purely security-centric perspective or focusing on only one border in isolation (e.g., Stimson Center, 2021). This article seeks to fill a crucial gap by conducting a direct, systematic *comparative analysis* of the *diplomatic strategies* accompanying the fencing of both borders. By juxtaposing the two cases, it aims to provide a more holistic understanding of Pakistan's evolving foreign policy on its western front, demonstrating that it is not a single policy but a bifurcated strategy tailored to vastly different historical and political realities.

### **Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative, comparative case study methodology to investigate the research question. This approach is particularly well-suited for in-depth analysis of complex political phenomena, allowing for a rich, contextualized understanding of how and why policy outcomes differ across cases (George & Bennett, 2005). By systematically comparing two distinct cases the fencing of the Afghan border and the Iranian border that share a common feature (policy implementation by the same state actor, Pakistan), the research design aims to isolate the key variables that account for the divergence in diplomatic approach and outcome.

The two cases for comparison are;

1. Case 1: The Pakistan-Afghanistan Border (The Durand Line). This case represents a strategy of unilateral securitization in the face of political contestation.
2. Case 2: The Pakistan-Iran Border (The Goldsmid Line). This case represents a strategy of bilateral, pragmatic cooperation, albeit with underlying tensions.

Data for this research is drawn from a wide range of primary and secondary sources to ensure triangulation and validity. Primary sources include official statements, press releases, and policy documents from the Pakistani Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Interior, and the military's Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR). Corresponding statements from Afghan and Iranian government officials are also analyzed. Parliamentary records and reports from both countries provide further insight into the official discourse surrounding the fencing projects. Secondary sources comprise a broad survey of academic literature, including peer-

reviewed journal articles and books on border studies, Pakistani foreign policy, and regional security. Additionally, detailed reports and analyses from reputable international and regional think tanks such as the International Crisis Group (ICG), the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), the Stimson Center, and Pakistan's Jinnah Institute are extensively used. Finally, high-quality news media analysis from outlets like Dawn, The Express Tribune (Pakistan), TOLONews (Afghanistan), Al Jazeera, and The Diplomat, covering the period from 2016 to 2025, provides a real-time account of the diplomatic engagements and incidents along the borders.

The comparative analysis is conducted through a uniform analytical framework applied to both cases. It examines the official reasons given for the construction of the fence, the way the initiative is presented to the neighboring country and the international community, the reactions of the neighboring state in terms of acceptance, objection, or resistance, the presence or absence of joint institutional arrangements for border management, and the policies introduced to manage the economic effects of fencing on border communities. By systematically applying this framework, the study moves beyond a simple description of events to an analytical comparison that explains the divergence in Pakistan's diplomatic strategies on its western frontier.

### **Case Study 1: The Afghanistan Border (The Durand Line) - A Strategy of Unilateral Securitization**

The fencing of the Durand Line is the centerpiece of Pakistan's new homeland security doctrine. It is a project born of immense frustration and driven by an overwhelming security imperative. However, its implementation has been a stark exercise in unilateral action, conducted in the face of persistent and vehement opposition from its Afghan neighbors, making it a classic case of state-led securitization overriding diplomatic concerns.

#### **The Bordering Strategy**

The decision to fence the 2,670 km border was a direct response to the escalating threat from the TTP. Following the 2014 APS massacre, the Pakistani military launched Operation Zarb-e-Azb, which successfully dislodged the TTP from its strongholds in North Waziristan. However, the group's leadership and fighters simply relocated across the porous border into eastern Afghanistan, from where they continued to plan and execute attacks inside Pakistan (Javaid & Firdous, 2019). For Islamabad, a physical barrier became the only viable option to sever this cross-border lifeline.

The project, which gained momentum in 2017, is a monumental feat of engineering. It consists of two sets of chain-link fences, three to four meters high, separated by a gap filled with concertina wire coils. The entire barrier is being monitored by a network of hundreds of newly constructed forts and watchtowers, equipped with advanced surveillance cameras, thermal imagers, and electronic intrusion detection systems (ISPR, 2017). The official cost is estimated to be well over \$500 million, a significant expenditure for a developing economy, underscoring the level of threat perceived by the state (Khan, 2021).

The framing of the project by Pakistani officials has been consistently and unapologetically security-centric. It is presented as a "non-negotiable" internal security measure essential for the "protection of the people of Pakistan" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018). Officials have repeatedly stressed that the fence is not aimed at dividing peoples but at stopping terrorists, smugglers, and other "undesirable elements." This narrative deliberately de-politicizes the act of fencing, framing it as a technical security solution rather than a political act aimed at settling a historical border dispute.

**Cross-Border Diplomacy & Friction**

This unilateral framing has been met with uniform rejection from Kabul. The core of the Afghan objection is the historical dispute over the Durand Line itself. For Afghan nationalists, the fence is a "unilateral imposition" and a "physical manifestation of Pakistan's attempt to permanently divide the Pashtun nation" (Statement by former President Hamid Karzai, cited in TOLONews, 2017). This sentiment is not confined to the former Ghani administration but is shared equally, if not more fervently, by the Afghan Taliban who now rule the country. Despite Pakistan's pivotal role in facilitating the US-Taliban peace talks and its long-standing relationship with the group, the Taliban have refused to concede on the border issue. Since their takeover in August 2021, there have been numerous documented incidents of Taliban border forces actively dismantling sections of the fence, leading to tense standoffs and armed clashes with Pakistani troops (Shahzad, 2022). For the Taliban, adhering to the nationalist Afghan position on the Durand Line is crucial for their domestic legitimacy.

This creates a deep paradox in Pakistan-Taliban relations. Islamabad demands that the Taliban regime take decisive action to eliminate TTP sanctuaries on Afghan soil, a key promise of the Doha Agreement. The Taliban, while officially denying the presence of TTP, have proven either unable or unwilling to do so. In response, Pakistan points to the fence as its own solution to the problem, a solution the Taliban actively resist. This dynamic has created a cycle of accusation and counter-accusation. Pakistan regularly lodges diplomatic protests over cross-border attacks, presenting dossiers of evidence of TTP activity, while the Taliban government protests the fence and occasional Pakistani cross-border air strikes targeting TTP militants (ICG, 2023). The result is a relationship characterized by deep mistrust and a near-total absence of cooperative border management mechanisms.

**Socio-Economic Consequences**

The socio-economic impact of the fence has been severe, particularly for the Pashtun communities who have lived and traded across the Durand Line for centuries. The barrier has severed kinship ties, disrupted traditional pastoral migration routes, and crippled the informal local economies that sustained these communities (Stimson Center, 2021).

While Pakistan has argued that the fence will boost formal trade by channeling it through official crossings, the reality has been one of increased bottlenecks and bureaucratic hurdles. The main crossings at Torkham and Chaman are frequently closed for extended periods due to security incidents or political tensions, causing massive losses for traders on both sides (World Bank, 2022). The livelihoods of thousands of local laborers, small-scale traders, and transporters who depended on the daily flow of goods and people have been devastated. While Islamabad has spoken of initiatives like issuing special passes for divided families and creating border markets, these have been slow to materialize and are dwarfed by the scale of the disruption. The fence has effectively securitized and formalized a border that was once a fluid social and economic space, and in doing so, has generated significant local resentment that could create new security challenges in the long run.

**Case Study 2: The Iran Border (The Goldsmit Line) - A Strategy of Cautious Cooperation**

The fencing of Pakistan's 909-kilometer border with Iran presents a starkly different picture. While also driven by significant security concerns, the project has been embedded within a broader, albeit fragile, framework of bilateral diplomacy and cooperation. This approach stems from a more

settled border history and a greater convergence of security interests, allowing for a pragmatic partnership that is largely absent on the Afghan front.

### **The Bordering Strategy**

The primary security drivers on the Iranian border are distinct from those on the Afghan border. The main threat perceived by Pakistan is the Baloch insurgency. Separatist groups like the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) and the Baloch Liberation Front (BLF) have, at times, used the vast and sparsely populated border region in Iran's Sistan and Baluchestan province as a safe haven to regroup and launch attacks against Pakistani security forces and infrastructure, particularly projects related to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) (Notezai, 2020). For Iran, the threat matrix is mirrored. It is deeply concerned about Sunni militant groups, particularly Jaish al-Adl (Army of Justice), an anti-Iran group that has carried out numerous deadly attacks on Iranian border guards and Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) personnel from alleged bases inside Pakistani Balochistan (Afridi & Sial, 2016). This mutual, mirrored threat from cross-border militancy creates a basis for cooperation that does not exist with Afghanistan, where the primary threat (TTP) is seen by Pakistan as being harbored by, not targeted at, the ruling regime. Beyond insurgency, a massive informal economy based on the smuggling of subsidized Iranian fuel into Pakistan and the flow of narcotics and other goods into Iran poses a shared challenge to state authority and revenue (ICG, 2019). The fencing project, which began in earnest in 2019, is therefore aimed at countering both insurgency and large-scale smuggling.

### **Cross-Border Diplomacy & Pragmatism**

The most significant difference lies in the diplomatic framing and management of the project. Unlike the unilateral declarations on the Durand Line, the Iran border fence is often framed by both sides as a coordinated effort to secure their "joint border." This cooperative discourse is underpinned by established bilateral mechanisms. The Pakistan-Iran Joint Border Commission meets regularly to discuss security issues, intelligence sharing, and coordinated patrols (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021). The two countries have also agreed to establish joint Border Sustenance Markets to formalize trade. This cooperative framework, however, is not without severe friction. It is a relationship of pragmatism, not deep trust. Both sides harbor suspicions that the other is not doing enough to crack down on militants operating from its territory. These tensions boiled over in a dramatic fashion in January 2024, when Iran launched missile strikes against what it claimed were Jaish al-Adl bases inside Pakistan. Pakistan, in a rare move, retaliated with its own strikes against alleged BLA/BLF hideouts inside Iran (Siddiqui, 2024). This unprecedented exchange could have triggered a major conflict. Yet, what followed was even more telling. Within 48 hours, both countries engaged in intense diplomacy, quickly agreeing to de-escalate, restore ambassadorial relations, and reaffirm their commitment to coordinated action against terrorism. This incident served as a stress test for the relationship, revealing its inherent fragility but also demonstrating a strong mutual interest in containing conflict and preserving the cooperative framework. Such a rapid, institutionally-managed de-escalation is difficult to imagine on the Afghan border, where the underlying political dispute would likely fuel a more prolonged crisis.

### **Socio-Economic Engagement**

Recognizing that a hard border would devastate the local economies on both sides, which are heavily dependent on the informal fuel trade, Pakistan and Iran have pursued a joint economic strategy to mitigate the impact. The centrepiece of this strategy is the establishment of joint border markets. The first of these, at Mand-Pishin, was inaugurated in 2023, with several more

planned (Radio Pakistan, 2023). The goal of these markets is to formalize the massive informal trade, allowing local communities to trade a range of goods with fewer tariffs and regulations. This provides a legal alternative to smuggling, aiming to co-opt local populations into the state's border management project rather than simply alienating them. While the long-term success of these markets remains to be seen, their very existence represents a fundamental difference in approach compared to the Afghan border. On the Iranian front, the security strategy is paired with a deliberate economic engagement strategy. On the Afghan front, the security strategy has largely resulted in economic disruption, with few viable alternatives offered to the affected populations. This highlights a more nuanced and collaborative approach to border management with Iran, where security and economic tools are used in tandem.

### **Comparative Analysis: Divergent Paths on a Western Front**

Pakistan's bordering practices with Afghanistan and Iran illustrate two sharply divergent models of security management and diplomatic engagement. While both fencing projects are officially justified by the imperative of safeguarding national security, their underlying logics, implementation strategies, and diplomatic trajectories reveal contrasting approaches shaped by distinct historical legacies and political contexts. On the Afghan frontier, Pakistan's strategy is characterized by unilateral securitization. The fence along the Durand Line is officially justified as a counter-terrorism measure, primarily aimed at containing cross-border infiltration by the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and regulating irregular migration. The initiative is framed domestically as an existential requirement for the survival of the state, leaving little space for bilateral consultation. This hard-line stance has met with consistent rejection from successive Afghan governments, which view the project not merely as a security measure but as an illegitimate attempt to enforce a disputed boundary.

With the absence of institutionalized cooperation, communication between the two states is largely ad hoc and crisis-driven, frequently erupting into violent clashes, retaliatory fire, and prolonged border closures. The economic dimension further exacerbates tensions, as fencing has disrupted cross-border trade networks, curtailed livelihoods, and fostered resentment among border communities who rely heavily on informal exchanges. In contrast, Pakistan's approach toward the Iranian frontier reflects a more cooperative and pragmatic model. The rationale here is framed around counter-insurgency, particularly against Baloch separatist movements, and efforts to curb smuggling of fuel and narcotics. Unlike the Afghan case, the fencing initiative has been portrayed as a joint response to a shared security challenge, often described as a means of securing a "border of peace and friendship." Iran's cautious acceptance is facilitated by the absence of a sovereignty dispute, which allows for functional engagement despite occasional tensions.

Established mechanisms, including the Joint Border Commission and regular intelligence-sharing protocols, provide a structured framework for dialogue and de-escalation. Even during serious crises, such as the January 2024 strikes, the two sides relied on diplomatic channels to contain escalation. The economic strategy is similarly collaborative, with both states working toward the establishment of joint border markets designed to formalize trade and generate lawful livelihoods, thereby reducing incentives for smuggling. These contrasting trajectories underscore that Pakistan's western border policy is far from uniform. The Afghan case represents a classic example of hard-power securitization in a politically contested and low-trust environment, where fencing serves as an instrument of unilateral state-building. By contrast, the Iranian case demonstrates a



hybrid approach, combining security imperatives with cooperative diplomacy and economic integration. Ultimately, the divergent outcomes highlight the decisive role of historical legacies and the nature of bilateral relations in shaping Pakistan's bordering strategies.

### **Discussion: Implications for Pakistan's Foreign Policy**

The bifurcated approach to fencing its western frontiers carries profound implications for Pakistan's foreign policy, its strategic posture, and its role in the region. This policy shift is not merely about infrastructure; it represents a fundamental reordering of Pakistan's strategic priorities. The fences are the physical tombstone of the doctrine of "strategic depth." By sealing its border with Afghanistan, Pakistan is explicitly prioritizing the insulation of its homeland from instability over the ability to influence its neighbor's internal politics. This marks a significant retreat from a decades-long policy of using Afghanistan as a strategic backyard. It reflects a sober realization within the security establishment that the blowback from such policies, in the form of the TTP and widespread radicalization, has become a greater threat than the conventional military challenge from India. This is a pivot from an offensive-defense posture to a defensive-defense posture on the western front. The fencing project is, at its core, an act of state-building. It is an assertion of Westphalian sovereignty the state's absolute control over its territory over a region where its writ has historically been weak. This prioritization of territorial integrity over cross-border ethnic and ideological influence is a significant step in the maturation of the Pakistani state. However, it comes at a cost. On the Afghan border, this assertion of sovereignty directly clashes with the ethno-nationalist aspirations of Pashtuns and the historical claims of the Afghan state, creating a permanent source of friction. On the Iranian border, it challenges the lucrative smuggling economy, risking the ire of powerful local mafias and communities dependent on that trade.

Pakistan's divergent strategies have different impacts on regional stability. The cooperative model with Iran, despite its fragility, contributes positively to regional security. By creating mechanisms to manage shared threats, it reduces the risk of unintended escalation and provides a framework for addressing issues like the security of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), whose western route runs through restive Balochistan. A stable Pakistan-Iran border is a prerequisite for CPEC's success. Conversely, the unilateral approach with Afghanistan is a source of persistent instability. It deepens the historic mistrust between the two nations, complicates any meaningful cooperation against terrorist groups like the TTP and IS-K, and risks further alienating the Pashtun populations on both sides of the line. This ongoing tension creates a volatile environment that can be exploited by other regional actors, including India, which has historically sought to leverage Afghan grievances against Pakistan. Finally, the discussion must acknowledge the inherent limitations of physical barriers. While the fences may succeed in reducing the cross-border movement of militants and smugglers to a degree, they cannot solve the underlying political and economic grievances that fuel these problems. The TTP's ideology will not be stopped by a fence, nor will the Baloch sense of marginalization or the economic desperation that drives smuggling. A fence is a tool for control, not a solution for conflict. Without a parallel strategy of political engagement, economic development, and addressing the root causes of militancy, the fences risk becoming monuments to a security-first approach that contains problems rather than resolving them. Long-term stability on the western front will require more than just concertina wire; it will require statecraft, diplomacy, and a commitment to inclusive development.

### **Conclusion**

This article set out to analyze Pakistan's decision to fence its western borders, arguing that this policy, while appearing uniform, has been pursued through two fundamentally divergent diplomatic strategies. The comparative case study of the borders with Afghanistan and Iran has substantiated this thesis, revealing a "tale of two fences" driven by distinct historical legacies, threat perceptions, and bilateral dynamics. The approach towards Afghanistan has been one of unilateral securitization. Rooted in the deep historical contestation over the Durand Line, Pakistan has prioritized its internal security over diplomatic comity, erecting a barrier against the will of its neighbor. This has resulted in a relationship defined by friction, mutual suspicion, and a near-complete absence of cooperative border management. In stark contrast, the approach towards Iran has been one of cautious cooperation. A settled border and mirrored security threats have allowed for a pragmatic partnership, featuring joint institutional mechanisms and economic engagement strategies designed to mitigate the negative impacts of the fence. While this relationship is not without severe tensions, it is managed through diplomacy and a shared interest in de-escalation.

The core finding of this research is that the nature of the bilateral relationship and the historical context of the border itself are more powerful determinants of diplomatic strategy than the physical act of fencing. Where the legitimacy of the border is accepted (Iran), cooperation is possible. Where it is contested (Afghanistan), unilateralism and conflict are the likely results. This policy pivot towards border hardening marks a definitive end to Pakistan's long-held doctrine of "strategic depth," signaling a strategic reorientation towards homeland security and territorial sovereignty. However, the long-term efficacy of this multi-billion-dollar project remains uncertain. Fences can manage symptoms, but they cannot cure the diseases of political grievance, ethnic nationalism, and economic desperation. The future stability of Pakistan's western frontiers will depend not only on the height and strength of its fences but on its ability to complement these hard security measures with sophisticated and sustained diplomacy, political engagement, and equitable economic development. Further research could build on these findings by conducting in-depth ethnographic studies of the borderland communities to assess the long-term socio-economic impact of the fences. Another fruitful avenue would be to analyze the role of third-party actors, particularly China, in shaping Pakistan's border management strategies, given the centrality of CPEC to regional geopolitics. Finally, as more data becomes available, quantitative analysis of the fences' effectiveness in reducing terrorist incidents and smuggling would provide a valuable empirical assessment of this monumental and transformative project in Pakistan's history.

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