

THE ISSUE OF PAK-AFGHAN BORDER CLOSURE: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE STAKEHOLDERS

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Abstract

The recent repatriation of the Afghan refugees to their parent country has been of great concern to the governments of Pakistan and the Afghan refugees. Delaying tactics and unwilling attitude of the refugees has exacerbated the security situation between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Consequently, the government of Pakistan has to close the Pak-Afghan border for its national interest and security concerns but the closure of border has created great problems for the people of both the countries; encompassing the farming class dependent on border trade, the business community, the students community and the people tied by blood and joint business enterprises across both sides of the border. The landlocked nature of Afghanistan has adversely affected the entire economy of Afghanistan since the use of Iranian routes for business purposes costs much to the treasury of Afghan people. This article aims at analyzing the issue of the closure of the Pak-Afghan border and resultant implications for the stakeholders.

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Introduction

The repatriation of the Afghan refugees who migrated to Pakistan as a result of the Soviet Union Intention in Afghanistan in 1979 has created great tension in the relations of the two states. At the time of the war, the government of Pakistan provided them all facilities of life by giving them basic facilities of life but now they are unwilling to go back to their country. The government of Pakistan, in order to implement the initiative, had to de-notify the 28 Afghan Refugees Camps in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa by bringing to an end the 46-years old story of the Afghan refugees (Dawn, Curtains for Afghan refugee camps in KP as Centre de-notifies last 28, 2025). The de-notified camps are situated in different parts of the country out of which eight are located in the Peshawar, five in Hangu, four in Kohat, three each in Nowshera

and Dir, two each in Mardan and Swabi and one in Buner (Dawn, 2025). The notification has also clarified that the property and non-movable assets as mentioned in the de-notified areas would be handed over to the Commissioner of Afghan Refugees. An official of the Afghan Refugees Commissioner states that the number of Afghan camps in the province is 43 out of which five were de-notified in September 2025, ten were de-notified on October 13, 2025 and the remaining 28 on October 15, 2025 (Tariq, Sarwar, & Ali, 2026). The most noteworthy thing here is the worsening of relations on account of the repatriation. The unwillingness on part of the Afghan refugees has compelled the authorities of the government of Pakistan to close down the Pak-Afghan border for all traffic and business activities.

Closure of the Pak-Afghan Border

The closure of the Pak-Afghan border has caused great problems to the people of both the people of Afghanistan and people of the tribal belt of Pakistan. The border has been the hub of economic activities and business enterprises since very long but the 9/11 made a landmark in the worsening of the Pak-Afghan relations since the border became the epic of terrorist and insurgent activities. Since the 9/11 scenario, many efforts were taken to improve border security, increase the number of check-posts and deploy more military personnel by doing away with all sanctuaries (Tariq, 2028). The US presence in Afghanistan during the post-9/11 scenario made it the epic of attention on account of the presence of the non-state actors. The strained relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan mainly owe its origin to the nature of the long, windy, treacherous and porous border. During the post-9/11 syndrome, Pakistan, keeping in view, its national interest, had to deploy round about 20, 0000 law enforcement personnel along the border (Ghani, 2026). The presence of 200 Check posts along the Pak-Afghan border, out of which only Torkham, GHulam Khan and Angurada have inadequate presence of security personnel (Tariq , Khan , & Khan, 2020).

The closure of the border has greatly impacted the poor community of the two countries because they had to rely on the business made through the border and even the business community had to suffer a lot. But the farming class of Afghanistan has faced financial crises since they have to depend on the business and imports and exports of the border (Rana , 2025). Perishable products of Afghanistan such as fresh fruits, vegetables, and dry fruits require shortest distance, low cost transport charges, and easy access to Pakistani market which can only be provided through routes of Durand line (Rana , 2025). Supply of goods and services through either substitute routes or through other countries may cause huge burden and financial loss to the business enterprises. Moreover, use of substitute routes may make exports less competitive due to longer transit and higher risks of perishable goods being rotten. Lack of proper

temperature or cold storage facilities to transport perishable goods to long-distance sea port is another area of concern for the farmers and business enterprises. The border is of much importance for both the states since it is one of the longest borders in the border catering for the socio-economic and good relations (Tariq, Khan , & Khan , 2020).

People having relations of blood and dependent on the business made through the Pak-Afghan border, despite the closure of the border had to make desperate efforts in getting to their destined targets. The border closure has resulted in creating hurdles in the way of supply of goods and services, the people across the border have to make distressed attempts in reaching Pakistani market (Rana , 2025). The blocking of Afghan onion goods to Pakistan on November 8, 2025 led to the use of the Iranian routes by misusing the early harvest program (Rana , 2025). Denying the entry of the Afghan consignment into Pakistan on the grounds that the early harvest program focused on providing mutual benefits to the farmers of both the countries on bilateral and reciprocal basis but no trade took place as the border remained closed (Rana , 2025). Afghanistan into Pakistan's was also denied on the ground that the early harvest facility may cater for the potential risk of misuse. So, for Pakistan and Afghanistan the routes of Iran can better be utilized by both the countries for the purpose of imports and exports besides the flow of human beings. The alternative routes of Iran through which supply of goods can be made, include Chabahar port, Hairatan-Termez and Torghundi-Serhetabat in Central Asia (Rana , 2025).

Trade through Alternative Routes

Pakistan has been providing easiest accessibility of routes to Afghanistan for the supply of goods and services due to the long border besides many passes- routes through mountains used for the easy access of people and imports-exports possible through mountain passes. The landlocked nature of Afghanistan makes it more dependent on Pakistan for all business activities.

The closure of Pak-Afghan border would delimit the trade facilities of the two countries but the

former would not suffer to the extent to which the latter is supposed to suffer. In order to minimize dependence on the trade across the border, Afghanistan showed her desire to seek for alternate routes and venues to carry on trade facilities but it would not be able to provide those opportunities to its exporters in the short-to-medium term trade facilities (Rana, 2025). The Iranian routes are longer in distances and more expensive, resulting in higher transaction and fuel costs as compared to Pakistani routes. For example, the areas of Kandahar and Helmand are about 150-300 Kilometer from the Pakistani Chaman-Spin Boldak border but 1,200-1,300 Kilometer to Iran's Zaranj or Delaram borders (Rana, 2025). Similarly, Balkh and Baghlan are roughly 500-700 Kilometer from Pakistan's Torkham-Jalalabad borders and 900-1,000 Kilometer from Iran's Islam Qala (Rana, 2025). The use of alternative routes would result in the increased transport charges, ranging from 30-50%. In all cases, whether the closure of the border or the use of alternate routes would result in creating problems for the farmers and business communities of the two countries (Tariq, Sarwar, & Ali, 2026).

The closure of Pak-Afghan border resulted in the growing number of Afghanistan-bound cargo stuck up in Pakistan. Afghanistan remains dependent on Pakistan for the trade and import-exports due to the landlocked nature of the country (Tariq, Sarwar, & Ali, 2026). Pakistani customs are of the view that Afghanistan-bound over 5,500 containers have been stuck either on roads or at port in Karachi. According to a report of the Pakistani Customs, about 4,650 containers go stuck at the sea and land ports in Pakistan after Pakistani Customs stopped their processing due to the closure of the border. It is also a matter of concern that Pakistan neither suspended the Afghanistan Transit Trade Agreement nor announced to stop trade with Afghanistan but still was unable to process the clearance of goods due to the closure of border to avoid congestion at the borders of Chaman and Torkham. About 729 containers were reported to be stuck up at Chaman border while about 142 were reported to be stuck up at Torkham border.

Despite the closure of border and issue of Afghan refugees to their country, both the states need to focus on the restoration and normalization of friendly relations. The normalization of relations is very much essential for the two states cannot live in isolation for common culture, religion, language and long porous border. The stakeholders from Pakistan as well as Afghanistan need to pay great attention to security situation and trust building measures for carrying on routine activities.

Efforts for Improving Relations

Both Pakistan and Afghanistan are the two Muslim Countries enjoying common culture, religion, culture, customs and traditions, common *Pashtu* Language tied by the long and porous Pak-Afghan border. A more secure and well-protected border would guarantee greater security and protection of the people of both the countries while worse security issues and closure of border may face them with serious problems. With this end in mind, efforts were initiated by the stakeholders of the two countries for the normalization of relations. Relations between the two states need to be improved for the sake of the two states in particular and regional stability in general. Mr. Ishaq Dar, Deputy Prime Minister of Pakistan, is of the view that Pakistan is closely monitoring the developments in recent weeks and months and any improvement in relations depends upon the Taliban's adherence to their commitments of peace and stability (Subh, 2025). Pakistan has been stressing on the Afghan government that cooperation in curbing terrorism and extremism would have a very significant impact on the normalization of relations and fostering of trade and economic enterprises. Moreover, the government of Pakistan has also welcomed the move of Afghan Interior Minister, asserting that Afghan soil, can in no case, be sued against any country (Tariq, Sarwar, & Ali, 2026). This has given more confidence to the neighboring country Pakistan because stability and cooperation on the Afghan soil would mean peace and stability in the region. In an effort of bringing normalcy in the Pak-Afghan relations, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and

Turkey have played their active roles but still no improvement has come in relations. For the regional stability normalcy in Pak-Afghan relations and Pak-India relations are sine qua non (Desk, 2025).

Pak-Afghan relations have been characterized by a complex interplay of security considerations, economic dependencies, and public sentiments (Imdad, 2026). This complex interplay has faced both the states with challenges and opportunities on account of their historical context and current scenario. But the public sentiments of the two countries have are eager to enhance cooperation particularly in security parameters (Imdad, 2026). On account of the common culture, common religion, common Pashtun sentiments; the general public sentiments the people of Afghanistan keep Pakistan in high esteem and want to use it as a transit route for other countries but their experiences at border crossings and airports have been negative (Imdad, 2026). Both the countries view each other as key components of critical partnership and want to address the issues of regional security by curbing terrorism and insurgency (Imdad, 2026). With this end in mind, the Pak-Afghan border is of utmost significance for the maintenance of peace and stability in the region

Economic Impact of Border Disruptions

The economic relationship between the two countries is very essential for the stability of the two countries as well as the region but the current scenario emanating out of the repatriation of the Afghan refugees significant disruptions has been faced by the two states. Economic instability between the two countries exacerbated on August 21, 2024 when some tribes tried to maintain a blockade of the main road between Peshawar and Torkham (Imdad, 2026). According customs report, a daily export loss of \$2.5 million is being caused due to the closure of border coupled with an imports and revenue loss of 550 million PKR (Imdad, 2026). This disruption has not only affected revenue collection but also placed a strain on trade activities having a negative impact on the flow of goods and services between the two states.

A joint strategy by both the states can help in improving the bilateral relations where both nations need to prioritize effective communication and coordination. The confidence building measures as trust-building in imports-exports, flow of people across the border having a valid visa and permit system by the authorized official of the two countries can mitigate the issues of insecurity and trading system. The creation of joint action committees at key border crossings and vulnerable passes could prove fruitful results in proactive step towards establishing trust and confidence. The committee should be tasked with addressing the key issues including the issues of economic and logistic challenges, illegal border crossing, blockade of unnecessary roads, and business enterprises (Imdad, 2026). The committee should also ensure transparency at the border points and reduce corruption at the border crossing. It is pertinent to pinpoint that continuous dialogues, negotiations, diplomacy and direct interaction by the responsible authorities of the two states can help in normalizing the situation.

Since mid-October 2025, the Pak-Afghan border remained closed with the eruption of clashes between the two states (Dawn, 2026). Successive rounds of talks failed to bring about peace and stability and reach out at a viable solution to the problem. As a result of the exacerbation of security nearly 200 Pakistani students strained in Afghanistan due to the closure of the Pak-Afghan border (Khan, 2026). The efforts for the repatriation of the students were made as a result of which 26 students were allowed to cross the Torkham on January 12, 2026. But it is also significant to mention that some students who arrived at the Torkham on 13 January 2026 have not yet been allowed by the Taliban to cross the border into Pakistan where the Afghan authorities have made it conditional to their verification by the Pakistani embassy or the Consulate in Jalalabad (Khan, 2026). Dr. Rizwanullah Wazir and Amanullah Wazir, representatives of the students had met the Governor of nagarhar and officials at the Pakistani embassy and the Jalalabad Consulate but he issue remained unresolved (Khan, 2026).

Dr. Noman Amir, another representative of the students in Jalalabad, has expressed his views that the current tension has multiplied their problems, leaving them stuck in Afghanistan (Khan, 2026). Foreign Office Spokesperson, Tahir Andrabi, has urged that the Pakistani embassy in Kabul is in contact with the Pakistani community for assistance and repatriation of the students to Pakistan.

The Refugees' Problem

The arrest and detention of the Afghan nationals have increased by 18% in January 2026 as compared to the previous week (AHmed, 2026). The three areas of the arrest during this period between January 1 and January 10, 2026 were Chaghi, Pishin and Islamabad (AHmed, 2026). The UN Refugee Agency, the UNHCR, and the UN Migration Office, IOM opine that during January 4 to January 10, 2026, of the total reported arrests and detentions about 73% came from Balochistan while 16% came from Islamabad. Moreover, of all the arrested and detained people during the period, Afghan Citizen Card holders and undocumented Afghan represented 87% of the total arrest and detentions while the number of Proof Registration holders stood a 13%. According to the data released by UNHCR and IOM showing that a total of 130, 999 Afghan Nationals were arrested during September 15, 2025 to January 10, 2026 (AHmed, 2026). Of these arrests, most of these were made in Balochistan amounting to 68%, followed by Islamabad amounting to 19%, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa 6%, Punjab 4% and Sindh 3% (AHmed, 2026). A situational analysis by International Federation of Red Crescent (IFRC) says since the beginning of 2025 until the end of November, Afghanistan has witnessed the return of over 5.2 million refugees (deportees and returnees) from Iran and Pakistan, an unprecedented movement that has further strained a country already grappling with a severe humanitarian crisis (AHmed, 2026). More than 3.6 million Afghan people have returned from Iran alone, out of which 1.2 million were deported. As per report of the Afghan Red Crescent Society data, the highest daily influx was

recorded in November 2025. It is worth mentioning that most of the Afghan Refugees cross through the official crossing points of Torkham (Nangarhar) and Spin Boldak (Kandahar), with smaller flows being observed through Angurada (Paktika) and through unofficial routes in Helmand.

Discussion and Conclusion

Relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan have entered a new phase of tension with the direct confrontation between the law enforcement agencies of the two countries. The presence of the long, windy, treacherous and porous border has been mainly the cause of worsening relations owing to the dependence of the people on trade through this route and particularly the people of Afghanistan. Moreover, the landlocked nature of Afghanistan has made it further difficult for the people of Afghanistan both the use of land routes and more financial expenditure to carry on trade through alternative routes. Pakistan's dilemma lies in the fact that the country is faced with the issues of security on both its eastern and western borders that has further exacerbated the internal dynamics of the country's security. Situation has worsened more in the post-9/11 scenario when Pakistan found itself involved in the war on terror resulting in the worsened law and order situation in the country, followed by many peace deals with the non-state actors and resultant military operations for curbing terrorism and insurgency.

The closure of border has added further to the worries of the people used to have their business enterprises through border routes. It is also important to note that round about 200 Pakistani students got stuck in Afghanistan as a result of the border-closure and have to move from post to pillar for the resolution of their issues but have to face great hurdles and are still facing problems. The use of alternative routes by the students as well as the business community may further add to the worries of the affected people but fulfilling all the legalities and formalities on part of the people of both the countries can create an atmosphere of trust and mutual understanding and would further help in

reducing issues of insecurity coupled with the blame game and counter blame game. Proper visa system and valid documentation with all the SOPs of the respective government would not only help in building friendly relations but also pave the way for lasting peace, stability and security of the two countries.

Joint action by the both the state is *sine qua non* for the peace and security of the two countries since friendly relations between the two can lead towards regional and international peace. The creation of a joint force with equal number of representation from both Pakistan and Afghanistan and monitored by a third party would be of great help in resolving the outstanding issues of border disputes, issues of security and business enterprises. The role of regional and international forums would also do invaluable service to the cause of border management and resolution of border disputes. Fresh Memorandum of Understanding between the two countries keeping in view the current scenario and demands of the business community, people having joint business enterprises along both sides of the border and security requirements should be of great help in strengthening of cordial relations between the two countries.

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