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The Strategic Importance of Pashtun Tribal Areas in Pakistan's Afghanistan Policy

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Abstract: The author, in this article, analyzes the strategic importance of Pashtun tribal areas in Pakistan's Afghan policy in the context of historical, political, security, and geopolitical factors. The study examines the legacy of the Durand Line, Pashtun ethno-political identity, the institutional integration of the FATA and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa regions, the Taliban movement, the TTP threat, and Pakistan's "strategic depth" concept as key analytical directions. The article evaluates the Pashtun tribal territories as a strategic space for Pakistan, allowing it to exert political influence over Afghanistan, ensure the security of the western border, limit India's influence in Afghanistan, and utilize cross-border tribal ties. At the same time, it is substantiated that these territories have also created complex problems for Pakistan's internal security, the fight against terrorism, federal governance, and state integration. Analysis shows that the stabilization of Pashtun tribal territories should not rely solely on military security measures, but should be carried out in harmony with legal governance, economic development, local legitimacy, border trade regulation, and regional cooperation mechanisms. The author of the article scientifically substantiates that stability in the Afghan-Pakistani border areas is of great importance for Central Asia, particularly for Uzbekistan, in terms of transport and communication projects, access to South Asia, and regional security.

Keywords: Pakistan, Afghanistan, Pashtun tribes, Pashtun territories, Durand Line, FATA, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Taliban, TTP, strategic depth, Afghan-Pakistani relations, transboundary security, tribal governance, jirga, madrasa networks, religious-political mobilization, counter-terrorism, geopolitical competition, Central Asian security, regional integration.

Introduction: The strategic importance of Pashtun tribal territories is becoming increasingly important in the scientific analysis of Pakistan's policy toward Afghanistan. These territories are not interpreted within the framework of a simple border space; they are a complex space where historical memory, ethnic solidarity, transboundary tribal ties, religious and political mobilization, security policy, military and logistical corridors, and regional geopolitical competition intersect. The Durand Line between Pakistan and Afghanistan was established in 1893 between British India and Afghanistan, dividing the Pashtun tribal territories between the two political jurisdictions. According to an analysis by the Middle East Institute, the Durand Line has been a source of tension in Afghan-Pakistani relations since the founding of Pakistan in 1947; as this line passes through mountainous and tribal areas, it is inextricably linked to issues of border management, sovereignty, the fight against terrorism, and ethnic policy.

The strategic importance of the Pashtun factor in Pakistan's Afghan policy is primarily determined by the problem of "western border security". Pakistan's political and military elites have historically viewed Afghanistan in the context of competition with India. Therefore, the formation of a political environment in Kabul that aligns with Islamabad's interests was one of the main directions of Pakistan's security strategy. The USIP study notes that the goals of India and Pakistan in Afghanistan are mutually competitive in nature, while

Pakistan has used the Afghan Taliban as a strategic proxy force [1].

The strategic position of the Pashtun tribal areas is more clearly visible through the FATA, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, North and South Waziristan, Bajaur, Mohmand, Kurram, Khyber, and Chaman–Kandahar and Torkham–Jalalabad routes. These territories served, on the one hand, as Pakistan's access corridors to Afghanistan, and on the other hand, as a socio-military base that allowed it to influence Afghan political processes. During the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Pakistani intelligence and military structures supported the mujahideen groups with the support of the United States and Saudi Arabia. According to the Middle East Institute, it was the Pashtun tribal areas that served as an important location for mobilizing fighters for the Afghan jihad, accommodating the influx of refugees, training religious and political personnel through madrasa networks, and subsequently strengthening the Taliban movement [2].

The internal political structure of Afghanistan is closely linked to ethnic, tribal, and religious factors. In this sense, the Pashtun territories are seen in Pakistani politics not only as a foreign policy resource; they are also of direct importance to Pakistan's internal security, national integration, and state sovereignty. The accession of FATA territories to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2018 marked a significant turning point in this matter. The International Crisis Group views this merger as an attempt to establish a new model of peace and governance in Pakistan's tribal areas. According to the Pakistani government, FATA joined Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2018 through the 25th constitutional amendment, with the goal of ensuring basic rights for the region's residents.

At the same time, the institutional integration of these regions has not fully eliminated security challenges. The return of the Afghan Taliban to power in Kabul in 2021 created a complex strategic situation for Pakistan. While Islamabad has long viewed ties with the Taliban as a tool of its security policy, the intensification of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan's activities after 2021, border conflicts, terrorist attacks, and diplomatic tensions with the Afghan side have exposed the internal contradictions of Pakistan's strategy. The UN Security Council report notes that the TTP was formed in 2007 as an alliance of various militant groups, with its roots tracing back to the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region. The International Crisis Group also noted that Pakistan's policy since the Taliban's return to power in 2022 has been complicated by internal security, lack of diplomatic recognition, and the activity of militant groups along the border [3].

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the scientific literature on this topic, Pakistan's Afghan policy is mainly analyzed through the Durand Line, Pashtun ethno-political identity, the concept of "strategic depth" the Taliban movement, the FATA/Khayber-Pakhtunkhwa regions, and transboundary security issues. Researchers evaluate the Pashtun tribal territories as a security buffer in Pakistan's foreign policy, a means of influencing Afghanistan, and a factor affecting internal stability.

W. Kaura identifies the Durand Line as one of the primary historical contradictions in Afghan-Pakistani relations. In his opinion, this border divided the Pashtun tribes between the two states, complicating issues of ethnic unity, sovereignty, and security [4]. While studying the political history of Afghanistan, T. Barfield substantiates the importance of a balance between tribal structures, central authority, and peripheral regions for the stability of the state [5].

B.R. Rubin and L.P. Goodson explain the instability in Afghanistan in relation to internal social structures, external interventions, and regional competition [6,7]. Their approach serves to explain the mechanisms of influence on Afghan political processes through the Pashtun regions of Pakistan. A. Rashid notes that Pakistani intelligence structures, madrasa networks, Afghan refugee camps, and the Pashtun tribal environment played a significant role in the formation of the Taliban movement. S. Coll points out that during the Soviet-Afghan War, Pakistan's border areas became a logistical and mobilization space for mujahideen groups [8].

In the works of A. Parkes, F. Grare, and Z. Constantino, Pakistan's "strategic depth" policy is analyzed in connection with the goals of competition with India, creating a secure environment on the western border, and maintaining political influence in Afghanistan. In these studies, Afghanistan is interpreted as a field of regional security, military strategy, and diplomatic competition for Pakistan.

In the analysis of FATA and the International Crisis Group on Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the integration of tribal areas into the Pakistani state system is assessed as an important reform [3]. While the 2018 FATA reform is aimed at strengthening political representation, legal governance, and security, challenges with local legitimacy, economic development, and TTP activity remain. The Taliban's return to power in Kabul in 2021 created a new security phase for Pakistan, as TTP activity and border conflicts further complicated Islamabad's policies.

Uzbek scientists approached this topic from the perspective of regional security. A. Khaydarov analyzes

the relationship between religious institutions and state power in Afghanistan and substantiates that the clergy and Islamic structures exert a strong influence on political processes. S. Buronov identifies internal factors, external forces, the ISI system of Pakistan, and issues of religious legitimacy in the formation of the Taliban movement. S. Buranov interprets Afghanistan as a strategic link between Central and South Asia. Sh. Goyibnazarov, on the other hand, links terrorism and religious extremism to socio-economic conditions, external sponsorship, and weak state governance.

METHODS

This article utilizes historical, systematic, comparative, institutional, and content analysis methods. The historical method was employed to examine the evolution of Pakistan's Afghanistan policy, the legacy of the Durand Line, the political significance of Pashtun tribal areas, and the process of merging the FATA region with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The systematic method served to analyze the Pashtun tribal areas in the context of Pakistan's security policy, the "strategic depth" concept, the Taliban factor, the TTP threat, cross-border tribal relations, and religious-political mobilization.

Through the comparative method, Pakistan's policy towards Afghanistan was compared across different periods: the Soviet-Afghan War, the rise of the Taliban in the 1990s, the post-2001 counter-terrorism era, and the political situation after 2021. The institutional method was used to study the influence of tribal leaders, the practice of the jirga, religious scholars, madrasa networks, security structures, and weak state institutions on political processes in the Pashtun territories. Based on content analysis, scientific literature, monographs, official documents, analytical center reports, and research by Uzbek scholars were synthesized.

DISCUSSION

The strategic importance of Pashtun tribal areas in Pakistan's Afghan policy is explained by several interrelated factors. These territories have been formed as a complex space where historical-border heritage, ethno-political identity, transboundary tribal ties, religious-political mobilization, the fight against terrorism, and regional geopolitical competition intersect. For Pakistan, the Afghan direction has always been linked to the security of the western border, strategic rivalry with India, influence over the political regime in Kabul, and control over the internal Pashtun territories [9]. For this reason, the Pashtun tribal territories have moved beyond the geographical boundary zone in Pakistan's foreign policy and have become a central link in security policy and regional strategy.

The Durand curve forms the historical basis of this issue. This boundary, established in 1893 between British India and Afghanistan, divided the historical habitat of the Pashtun tribes between the two political jurisdictions. After Pakistan gained independence, this line became a constant source of sovereignty, ethnic solidarity, and security issues in Afghan-Pakistani relations. The reactionary attitude of Afghan political elites toward the Durand Line has reinforced Pakistani strategic perceptions of the weakness of the western border. As a result, Islamabad interpreted the presence of sympathetic political forces in Afghanistan as a necessary condition for national security.

The strategic value of Pashtun tribal areas is closely linked to Pakistan's "strategic depth" approach. According to this approach, the formation of a political environment in Afghanistan that meets Pakistan's interests will limit Indian influence, secure the western border, and maintain regional influence. In the studies of A. Parkes, F. Grare, and Z. Constantino, Pakistan's Afghan policy is explained by its long-term security rivalry with India, its practice of working with proxy groups, and its desire to maintain influence in the Afghan political arena. From this perspective, the Pashtun territories served as an access corridor to Afghanistan, a channel of political influence, and a military-logistical base for Pakistan.

During the Soviet-Afghan War, the role of these territories intensified. Pakistan's border regions have become an important place for mobilizing mujahideen groups, delivering weapons and financial assistance, accommodating Afghan refugees, and forming new political and religious personnel through religious education networks. In the works of S. Coll and A. Rashid, the connection between Pakistani intelligence structures, madrasah networks, Afghan refugee camps, and the Pashtun tribal environment is extensively covered [8, 10]. These processes subsequently created the social, ideological, and organizational foundation for the formation of the Taliban movement.

The rise of the Taliban movement revealed the dual nature of the Pashtun factor in Pakistani politics. On the one hand, the Taliban was seen as a political force in Afghanistan close to Pakistan's interests. On the other hand, the Taliban's experience increased the risk of religious and political radicalization, independent branching of militant groups, and loss of state control in Pashtun tribal areas. A. Giustozzi analyzes the Taliban as a complex insurgent structure that relies on local grievances, tribal ties, religious legitimacy, and cross-border shelters [11]. This approach indicates that Pashtun territories have ceased to be mere auxiliary

spaces and have gradually become an environment that reproduces political violence.

FATA and the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa issue are important areas related to Pakistan's internal state-building. For a long time, FATA was governed under a special legal regime, in which state institutions, the judicial system, political representation, and civil administration developed in a limited form. FATA's accession to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2018 was an important step by the Pakistani state towards integrating the tribal areas into the constitutional system. This reform was aimed at strengthening legal governance in Pashtun areas, expanding the political representation of the population, and reducing the social base of extremist groups. Nevertheless, institutional integration did not quickly eliminate security challenges. Issues of local legitimacy, economic development, tribal traditions, military governance heritage, and trust in central authority were preserved.

The TTP phenomenon represents one of the sharpest contradictions in Pakistan's policy towards Afghanistan. While Pakistan has long viewed its relationship with the Afghan Taliban as a tool of strategic influence, the TTP has waged an armed struggle against the Pakistani state, exploiting the same religious-political discourse and the environment of weak governance in the tribal areas [12]. The surge in TTP activity following the Taliban's return to power in Kabul in 2021 has complicated Islamabad's policy. Pakistan is attempting to pressure Kabul regarding TTP groups using Afghan territory, while the Taliban government has limited capacity to fully control cross-border militants. This situation clearly illustrates the transformation of the Pashtun tribal areas from a strategic resource into a security liability.

However, the institutional integration of these regions has not fully resolved security issues. The return of the Afghan Taliban to power in Kabul in 2021 created a complex strategic situation for Pakistan. While Islamabad had long viewed its ties with the Taliban as a tool of its security policy, the post-2021 environment, marked by the intensified activities of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, border conflicts, terrorist attacks, and diplomatic tensions with the Afghan side, has exposed the internal contradictions of Pakistan's strategy. A UN Security Council report notes that the TTP was formed in 2007 as an alliance of various militant groups, with its roots tracing back to the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region [13]. The International Crisis Group also noted in 2022 that Pakistan's policy since the Taliban's return to power has been complicated by internal security challenges, a lack of diplomatic recognition, and the activity of militant groups along the border [3].

Tribal governance institutions also form a crucial aspect of this discussion. The jirga, tribal leaders, local ulema, and madrasa networks play a major role in shaping political legitimacy in the Pashtun territories [14]. The Pakistani state has utilized these institutions at various times for mediation, control, and maintaining local balance. However, in an environment of weak state institutions, these very same local structures have also been turned into tools of mobilization by radical groups. Therefore, it is insufficient to explain the political processes in the Pashtun tribal areas solely through official state policy; local customs, religious legitimacy, tribal solidarity, and cross-border kinship networks must also be at the center of the analysis.

A. Khaydarov's research on the relationship between the Muslim clergy and power in Afghanistan provides an important theoretical foundation for this issue. In his approach, religious institutions, the ulema, and Islamic legitimacy in Afghanistan's political processes are manifested in constant competition and cooperation with state power [15]. This conclusion can also be applied to the Pashtun regions of Pakistan, as madrasa networks, local clergy, and religious discourse have been powerful drivers of political mobilization in the areas bordering Afghanistan. Religious institutions have sometimes served as peace mediators, sometimes as a means of radical mobilization, and at other times as a tool for legitimizing dissent against the state.

Uzbek researcher S. Buronov analyzes the origin of the Taliban movement through a combination of internal and external factors. His research singles out the civil war in Afghanistan, the weakness of the central government, tribal fragmentation, the problem of religious legitimacy, Pakistan's ISI system, and the influence of external powers [16]. This approach is significant for analyzing Pakistan's policy in its Pashtun tribal areas, as the Taliban phenomenon was formed precisely at the intersection of internal Afghan factors and the foreign policy Pakistan conducted through its border regions. S. Buronov's "Afghan dualism" approach is based on studying Afghanistan as both a security threat and a space of interregional opportunities simultaneously [17]. This approach makes it possible to connect Pakistan's Afghanistan policy with the interests of Central Asia.

Using a SWOT approach, the role of the Pashtun tribal areas in Pakistan's Afghanistan policy can be assessed as follows. Strengths are distinguished by geographical proximity, cross-border tribal ties, channels of historical-religious influence, and opportunities to work with Pashtun political forces in Afghanistan. Among the weaknesses, limited state control, conflict between tribal governance and formal institutions,

economic backwardness, a propensity for radicalization, and the threat of the TTP are evident. Opportunities include deepening the integration of FATA, legalizing border trade, modernizing local governance, and developing economic diplomacy with Afghanistan. Threats are defined by the activity of the TTP and other militant networks, the Taliban government's lack of international recognition, Afghan-Pakistani border conflicts, the spillover of the India-Pakistan rivalry into Afghanistan, and the risk of transnational terrorism.

RESULTS

Based on the above, the Pashtun tribal territories have emerged as a complex geopolitical space of long-term strategic importance in Pakistan's Afghan policy. These territories enabled Pakistan to exert political influence over Afghanistan, secure the western border, limit Indian influence in Afghanistan, and utilize cross-border tribal ties. At the same time, these same territories posed serious challenges to Pakistan's internal security, public administration, and federal integration.

The first important conclusion is that the Durand Line remains the primary source of historical and political tension in Pakistani-Afghan relations. As this border divides the historic areas of residence of the Pashtun tribes between the two countries, issues of ethnic security, border control, and sovereignty have always been central to Pakistan's Afghan policy. The historical objections formed by Afghanistan to the Durand Line have reinforced perceptions of the weakness of the western border among Pakistan's political and military elites [18].

The second result is linked to Pakistan's "strategic depth" approach. The study shows that Islamabad has long evaluated Afghanistan in the context of competition with India. Therefore, the presence of political forces aligned with Pakistan's interests in Kabul was interpreted as an important condition for national security. In this policy, the Pashtun tribal territories served as an access corridor to Afghanistan, a political communication channel, a military-logistical base, and a place for religious-political mobilization.

The third result is that the function of Pashtun areas changed during the Soviet-Afghan War, the rise of the Taliban in the 1990s, and the post-2001 period of the fight against terrorism. Initially, these areas served as a place for mobilizing mujahideen groups, accommodating refugees, and directing foreign aid to Afghanistan. At a later stage, they influenced the social, ideological, and organizational formation of the Taliban movement. After 2001, these areas became a focus of acute problems related to the fight against international terrorism, the activities of militant groups, and Pakistan's internal security.

The fourth result is related to the institutional integration of FATA and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. FATA's accession to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2018 was an important step for the state of Pakistan towards incorporating the tribal areas into the constitutional and legal system. This reform is aimed at expanding political representation, strengthening legal governance, and reducing the social base of extremist groups. The results of the study show that the process of institutional integration has not yet yielded a fully sustainable result in matters of security, economic development, local legitimacy, and trust in the state.

The fifth result is manifested in the different interaction of the Taliban and TTP factors. Pakistan has long viewed relations with the Afghan Taliban as a means of strategic influence. The TTP, however, has become a security threat to the Pakistani state by exploiting weak governance, religious and political radicalization, and cross-border militant networks in Pashtun tribal areas. The Taliban's return to power in Kabul in 2021 further intensified TTP activity, border conflicts, and tensions in Islamabad-Kabul relations.

CONCLUSION

The study of the strategic significance of the Pashtun tribal territories in Pakistan's Afghan policy shows that these territories are interpreted in relations between the two states not only as border areas. They represent a complex strategic territory intertwined with historical heritage, ethno-political identity, transboundary tribal ties, religious-political mobilization, security policy, and regional geopolitical competition. The division of the Pashtun tribes into two political spaces through the Durand Line has created long-standing mistrust, sovereignty disputes, and security problems in Pakistani-Afghan relations. For this reason, the Pashtun tribal territories have always been of strategic importance in Pakistan's foreign policy.

At the same time, Afghanistan's policy of relying on the Pashtun regions of Pakistan has had complex long-term security consequences. Support for mujahideen groups during the Soviet-Afghan War, the rise of the Taliban movement in the 1990s, and the post-2001 stages of counter-terrorism altered the function of Pashtun tribal areas. These territories, which were initially an instrument of foreign political influence, have subsequently become a source of radicalization, the activity of cross-border militant groups, and threats to Pakistan's internal security. In particular, the TTP phenomenon indicates that Pakistan's selective policy toward the Afghan Taliban has had a negative impact on domestic security.

The annexation of the FATA territory to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2018 marked a significant institutional turning point for Pakistani statehood. This reform was aimed at incorporating tribal territories into the constitutional-legal system, expanding political representation, strengthening civil governance, and reducing the social base of extremist groups. However, research findings suggest that formal integration has not fully addressed issues of local legitimacy, economic development, trust in the state, relations with tribal institutions, and security. Therefore, the stabilization of Pashtun tribal areas cannot be achieved through administrative and legal reforms alone; this process must be carried out in harmony with economic development, education, local governance, border trade, and social integration mechanisms.

One of the important conclusions of the article is that the Pashtun tribal territories have a dual nature as a strategic resource and security threat to Pakistan. They have allowed Pakistan to influence political processes in Afghanistan, while simultaneously exacerbating problems of radicalization, the movement of militant groups, border conflicts, and federal governance within the country. The Taliban's return to power in Kabul in 2021 further exacerbated this conflict. While Pakistan expected security guarantees from the Taliban authorities, TTP activity, border tensions, and political disagreements with Kabul raised new strategic questions for Islamabad.

From the perspective of Central Asia and Uzbekistan in particular, stability in the Pashtun tribal territories is of particular importance. Access to South Asia through Afghanistan, access to Pakistani ports, the development of transport and communication projects, and the expansion of regional trade relations directly depend on the security environment in the Afghan-Pakistani border areas. Therefore, this topic is not limited to the bilateral relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan; it is also inextricably linked to issues of geoeconomic connectivity between Central and South Asia, regional security architecture, and the prevention of transnational threats.

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