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Afghanistan: Borders, Tribes & Empires – The Past That Shapes the Future

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Abstract: This research explores how the tribal patchwork of Afghanistan has had a long-term effect on the country and the politically drawn boundaries that define the politics of this nation. As the paper shows, it is by contextualizing the analysis within the legacies of the Durrani Empire and colonial-era settlements, including the Durand Line, that one can understand how historical processes of tribal autonomy, imperial interruption, and conflicted borders have further entrenched political division and cycles of violence. Building on a diverse corpus of historical, political, and regional literature, the discussion is used to elucidate how crosscutting tribal loyalties and exogenously induced geopolitical forces are converging to weaken state-building and national unity. Although pointing out the structural continuation of such dynamics, the article makes the point that inclusive governance, cooperation in regional mechanisms, as well as investment in education are the ways that have the potential to lead to peace and stability. By so doing, it adds to a wider discussion on conflict resolution, politics along the borders, and the possibility of lasting stability in Afghanistan.

Key Words: Afghanistan, Tribal Mosaic, Durrani Empire, Durand Line, Borders, Pashtun Identity, Colonial Legacy, Regional Geopolitics

Introduction

The mountainous nature of Afghanistan conceals its sociopolitical history, which can be described as complicated with tribal fragmentation, imperial powers' competition, and changing territorial borders. The native people, such as the Pashtuns, Tajik, Hazaras, Uzbeks, Turkmens, and Nuristanis, as well as the Balochs, have their own customary law and localized political institutions that have historically opposed centralized power. This has been the chronic opposition to state-building and tribal sovereignty in which all efforts to establish a central authority repeatedly failed before the established cultural bindings (Barfield, 2012). Such a shift was reached in 1747 when Ahmad Shah Durrani rose to power, creating the Durrani Empire in the wake of the destruction of the Persian state by Nader Shah. Ahmad Shah brought together several Pashtun tribes and extended his rule to parts of northwest India, including Kashmir, Multan, and Delhi. Although the empire embodied Afghan independence, it was weak as an administrative authority and was ruled by a fusion of royal absolutism, tribal council, and Qizilbash bureaucratic elites. Such a hybrid system revealed a fundamental paradox: control over the center required tribal permission; thus, tempering the ability of the empire to remain centrally organized in the long run (Noelle, 1997; Hopkins, 2008).

The British entered the country and used it as a base against its rival, Russia, in the so-called Great Game that brought about the strategic importance of Afghanistan in the nineteenth century. This era in the country was less one of a unified nation and more what would be considered a contested frontier, a world that was supported to ensure a safety net for the imperial power. The most dramatic product of this competition was the Durand Line agreement in 1893, signed between Amir Abdur Rahman Khan and the British. This highly divided the Pashtun-tribal territories without considering ethnic and cultural unity, giving birth to a geopolitical fault line that prevails today (Kaura, 2017). Unlike most colonial land frontiers that were regularized later, the Durand Line has not been accepted by subsequent

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Afghan regimes. It is always rejected by Afghan leaders as a lacking legitimate imposition through colonialism that weakens tribal solidarity and sovereignty. The dispute over the boundary between Pakistan and India and the fact that the latter considers it unsettled persists as a source of mistrust in foreign relations and gives terrorists a free path across boundaries. This yet-to-be-resolved border conflict destabilizes as it divides along ethnic, tribal, and political lines (Akbar, 2024).

The results of the fragmentation of tribal society and the drawing of artificial borders by colonialists are still evident in the present political settlement of Afghanistan. The establishment of the Taliban as a dominant power, based on the leadership of Pashtuns, represents both ethnic power imbalances and the marginalization of other groups of people, like Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks. Such dynamics undermine the genuineness of the movement as a national government. In the meantime, foreign forces playing key roles in Afghanistan's stability--as indicated by Pakistan, Iran, China, and Russia--take advantage of such instability, recreating historical patterns of foreign intervention in Afghanistan's politics that began during the nineteenth century (Noelle, 1997; Hopkins, 2008).

Together, these processes show that the current issues of Afghanistan cannot be discussed without references to its history. Centralization of power has always been thwarted by the autonomy of tribes, the incursion of foreign powers, and disputed borders. The existence of such legacies implies that the sustainable stability will involve the inclusive rule that will allow accommodating ethnic diversity, settle the issue of the Durand line, and minimize external manipulation. Such measures are necessary, as otherwise Afghanistan stands the risk of being trapped in the historical progression of factionalism and struggle that has characterized it.

Literature Review

The development of the political and cultural life in Afghanistan has become unique because of the outstanding ethnic diversity and societal patterns of tribes. It has various communities living in the country, which are the Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, Turkmens, Nuristanis, as well as Baloch, who practice various languages, customs, and governance systems. Such ethnic plurality has traditionally inhibited the development of cohesive centers of power, whilst promoting local self-sufficiency. As stated by Barfield (2012), the political order in Afghanistan has never relied on coercive state sovereignty as much as it has on models of governance aligned to the tribal systems of organisation. Local institutions like the jirga or council of elders serve as dispute settlement and consensus-seeking devices that strengthen decentralised governance that resists state centralisation in the long run. One of the more formidable sets of norms, still operating, however, is amongst the Pashtuns, through their so-called honor code, or Pashtunwali. The Pashtunwali determines aspects of justice, hospitality, and revenge, and simultaneously entrenches societal stratification. According to Eurac Research (2023), Pashtunwali can be used to discriminate against women and other minorities like the Hazaras and Tajiks. This brings about structural injustices in governance and access to justice since the people who are in the minority do not have a say in the decision-making arena. As a result, tribal norms have been both stabilizing and exclusionary to the effort of nation-state-building.

The Durrani Empire was a watershed moment in the history of Afghanistan, where tribal power met the state formation process. Ahmad Shah Durrani, the founder of the empire, managed to unite various tribes of Pashtuns and built what would be considered the first state of Afghanistan. His rule was a mixture of complete monarchy and dependence on tribal consultations that did not have institutional stability since they were a source of unification (Britannica Editors, 2025). According to Noelle (1997), the governance of Ahmad Shah was so dependent on patronage and personal legitimacy, which was in support of Qizilbash elite favours, as opposed to building permanent institutions of the bureaucratic establishment. This dependency on personal power led to the fact that initially the empire was unified, but after his demise, the structures of the empire weakened and could break into pieces. The major military campaigns formed the core of the solidification of power by Ahmad Shah and legitimation. His conquests in northern India and Khorasan not only meant wealth to the empire, but they also led to his image of being a powerful ruler. According to Dalini (2015), such campaigns provided essential resources and loyalty of tribal elites. Yet this was an unsustainable strategy over time, since the territorial extension did not have built-in mechanisms of integration, including

an administrative infrastructure or civic institutions. The empire was still held together by force and benefices as opposed to institutional integrity, which would recur everywhere in Afghan governance over the centuries.

The invasion of Afghanistan by the colonialists threw a spanner into the state process as well. A strategic position in the Great Game between British India and Tsarist Russia, Afghanistan became a buffer zone, and in 1893, it was separated by the Durand Line, defining the British and the Afghan spheres of influence. The frontier divided Pashtun tribes between two states in a rather carefree approach to cultural and ethnic realities (Kaura, 2017). This boundary became a continual source of conflict, with each of the Afghan governments refusing to recognize it as formal and viewing it as a colonial encroachment. According to Aryal and Pulami (2024) and Rai (2024), to this day, the Durand Line works to influence the Afghan identity politics and international relations and fuel the mistrust and territorial problems between the two countries (Afghanistan and Pakistan). The unsettled Durand Line has had severe social and geopolitical implications. Tribal societies that have a split due to international boundaries tend to have their cross-border kinship networks, which allow a greater integration of culture and mobility of the insurgency. Akbar (2024) adds that the boundary has now become the hot zone in the Afghan-Pakistani relations, catalyzing the conflicts across the border and destabilizing the cooperation in the region. Their unwillingness to accept the boundary has given rise to a long-standing geopolitical conflict, which has been interfering with the stabilization of the region. This points to the effect of imposed colonial cartography in the form of artificial state boundaries that remain obstructions to peace and integration.

The history of Afghanistan shows that such a scenario is not a small recurring pattern: the attempts of centralization are ruined by tribal independence, dependence on charisma, and foreign interventions. Barfield (2012) explains that the decentralized systems ensured the resilience of the Afghan society, and they also undermined the capacity of the state to set up centralized power. In the same way, the empire of Ahmad Shah was characterized by unity through conquering and tribal affiliations; however, the absence of any lasting institutions meant the rapid decline of central authority following the death of its founder (Noelle, 1997). The Durand Line further aggravated these internal paradigms by creating an external boundary between Afghan society that has since ingrained structural instability into the geography of the state itself (Kaura, 2017). In modern terms, these historic forces still exert an impact on the political issues of Afghanistan. Those governance models, which disregard the traditional tribal practices, face difficulty in gaining legitimacy, and using the traditional practices will leave minority groups and women without equal participation. Constant agitation over the Durand Line dispute also shows how colonial-era boundaries have political currency in contemporary times. Rai (2024) reiterates that the line is met with wariness by the Afghans because of a wider distrust of outside interventions. The legacies need to be reconciled through governance systems that offer strong local self-governance and adequate integration into the national structures, besides solving structural inequalities inherent in the traditional systems.

The literature shows that the historical development of the political order in Afghanistan has the elements of ethnic and tribal pluralism, the heritage of the Durrani Empire, and boundary-making by colonial powers. The tribal political systems have given predominance at local levels and insufficient supremacy in the centre, whereas the Durrani Empire gave unitary but institutional intolerance. Interventions by colonialists, such as the Durand Line, added layers of problems to these internal problems as it arbitrarily drew borders dividing people and instigated a struggle. Taken together, these forces explain why the state-building in Afghanistan has continued to flounder over the centuries. To ensure stability in future governance, scholars stress that one must have inclusive models that accommodate the tribal structure, minorities, and colonial remnants to ensure long-term stability.

Research Methodology

The research is qualitative in nature as it synthesizes secondary materials such as peer-reviewed history, ethnography, and geopolitical analyses. Key materials were identified by carrying out a specific search of the content on the ethnic composition of Afghanistan, the Durrani Empire, and the Durand Line, with measurement of the word credibility and recency. Sources of repute like academic monographs, journal articles, and institutional reports, e.g., Routledge, the Encyclopaedia Britannica, and think tanks like the Observer Research Foundation were selected to ensure reliability.

The methodology has the potential to triangulate the historic, cultural, and political implications to be a complete and valid source of knowledge on the issue of fragmented governance and contested borders of Afghanistan.

Discussion

Colonial Boundaries and Tribal Realities

The Durand Line is a remarkable one of colonial maps that flew in the face of tribal and ethnic realities in Afghanistan. Mapped jointly by British and Afghan discussions in 1893 under colonial imperatives that ignored the social and cultural integrity of communities, these cuts through the tribal territory of Pashtuns, and they fragmented their communities and erased cohesion (Aryal & Pulami, 2024). According to the analysis of the European Foundation of South Asia issues, Pashtunwali is a local set of codes that strengthens communalism, but the imposed boundary rips off these ethical and cultural principles. Tribes that lie across the line experience constant interruptions in life, unstable kinship systems, and a general feeling of being uprooted (EFSAS). The Durand Line remains an incongruent point of tension in the relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan, mistrust, which still exists to hold up to the current time.

The Durrani Unification: Weak and Fleeting

Ahmad Shah Durrani is recognized as the founder of modern Afghanistan, as he was able to unite the Pashtun tribes in 1747. His rule expanded to northeastern Indian provinces like Kashmir and Delhi and marked a memorable and yet temporary political unity (Britannica Editors, 2025), Encyclopedia Britannica. His rule was, however, mainly based on personal charisma, tactical coverage of tribe elders, and control using conquest. The administration did not have a strong bureaucratic system: much of the power was handed out patrimonially, tax sources were unequal, and power was mostly inherited or traded. As a direct result of this, the empire disintegrated shortly after the death of Ahmad Shah due to the inability of an empire with such origins to maintain any degree of cohesion based on systemic foundations.

Consequences of Modern Politics

The current political environment of Afghanistan is still very profoundly influenced by its contentious history. Tribalities remain a source of local power and identity, and in many cases have taken precedence over national structures. Although Pashtunwali continues to define justice and social norms among Pashtuns, it recreates hierarchy within Pashtuns, which puts other groups at a disadvantage (efsas.org). The continuance of the Durand Line provides not simply a problem of political rivalry and differences, but also of cultural resentment. The examples of Pashtun nationalism and the constant protest against border fencing are part of the mechanisms to ignore the local agency and shared heritage boosted by colonial borders (Ali et al., 2025). Although there have been many inclusive governance initiatives, they often fail due to the existence of Pashtun-dominant politics and the existence of contested boundaries. In addition to the intra-state level actors, external powers, such as Pakistan, Iran, and local rivals, are still using these internal divisions to interfere in intra-state politics. Historic rivalry of the Durand Line is just a surface reflection of deeper problems: sovereign rights, identity, and the right to rule. Afghan leaders do not recognize the Line, further illustrating its role in the symbolism of colonial injustice and a source of anti-colonial protest. The current unresolved tension, along with the identity politics and foreign intervention, still impedes the progress of Afghanistan's nation-building.

Conclusion

The longstanding fragmentation in Afghanistan is not imaginable without taking into account a combination of tribal complexity and colonial intrusions. The short-lived unity created by the Durrani Empire showed the possible coalescing strength as well as the weakness of tribal type rule. Likewise, the establishment of the Durand Line entrenched the interference of external interests in the physical body, the ancestral destruction of communities, and an inculcation of mistrust. Collectively, these historical (dis)contents also persist to influence the socio-political realities of Afghanistan, where ethnic allegiances and contentious boundaries hamper sound nation-building. This understanding of how power is wielded and why it is wielded is critical not only to understanding the enduring turmoil in Afghanistan but also to putting into practice ways forward toward inclusive governance and long-term regional stability.

Recommendations

Inclusive Governance

The stability of the Afghan state in the long run means that the different forms of power of the country must be shared equitably between the various tribes and ethnic groups. Creating governance systems that capture the voices of Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, and others will reduce historic grievances and enhance national unity.

Reconsideration Dialogue at the Border

Since the history of the Durand Line is controversial, there is a need to renew dialogue between Afghanistan and Pakistan in order to address boundary issues. Such discourses must put the realities of borderland populations in the forefront, diminish cross-border insurgency, and admit to the necessity of increased communal integrity.

Regional Collaboration

The stability of Afghanistan is infinite with the interest of the neighboring states. Proactive regional interaction- especially by Pakistan, Iran, China and Russia can enable peace-building efforts, security, and infrastructural development. A friendly regional mechanism would not only help cushion Afghanistan against outside interference but also strengthen financial stability.

Education and Young People

Promoting education and civil services among the younger generations will help to empower Afghanistan by removing the tribal division and promoting unity. The investment in youth-based programs will lead to building a common national narrative that will align with the ethnic fault lines and provide the underpinnings of a more cohesive and resilient Afghan society.

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