



BORDER CLASHES IN AFGHANISTAN SINCE THE TALIBAN TAKEOVER

The first five months since the withdrawal of US troops and the forces of its NATO allies and operational partners, which led to a hasty Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, have been marked with recurrent border disputes and armed clashes, the most recent incident of which became the shootings at the Afghan-Turkmen border and the Afghanistan-Pakistan border conflict across the so-called Durand line. In late December 2021 and early January 2022, the Taliban forces disrupted the construction of a security fence by the Pakistani military in their attempt to fence most of the 2,600 km Afghanistan-Pakistan border, as mortars were fired across the border.

The dispute long precedes the Taliban movement, as traditionally Afghan governments refused to recognize the Durand line as a permanent international border, while Pakistan was historically wary of Afghanistan's support for Pashtun separatism in Pakistan, so that from 2014 on Pakistan launched the construction of two-layer fence along the entire Afghanistan-Pakistan border to impede the movement of illicit goods and people. In this regard, not only did the Taliban assert the right for the free movement of people across the borders of the colonial period, but, according to the Afghan side, the demarcation of the Durand line by the Pakistani military exceeded over certain areas that would be considered Afghan territories.

If we zoom out from the border clashes in the field and take a look at the background of the conflicts, we can see that Durand line problem between Afghanistan and Pakistan is something beyond an ordinary border dispute. In time it is rather evolve into a geostrategic conflict of interest that exacerbates the current border disputes. When we take a look at the root cause of this issue we see that it goes way back to 1893. At that period Foreign Secretary of British India Mortimer Durand had made an agreement with the ruler of Afghanistan Abdur Rahman Khan demarking the borders of Afghanistan with Pakistan. However Pashtuns who are living in the area were not happy with this decision and protested against it. On the other side up until today Pakistan consistently asks Afghanistan to recognize the Durand line which cause a tension between two countries.

Though, Durand line was not accepted by Taliban during their first takeover or af-

terwards by Kabul government. Nowadays we see that Taliban did not change its opinion about the Durand line. Talking about the perspective of Pakistan we can say that Islamabad attaches a political gain aim to the Durand line border dispute, therefore put more emphasis comparing with an ordinary border dispute issues. Due to stance of these two countries we see events that quickly escalates and reach a state of border clashes. Without a clearly demarcated lines both Afghans living in the area and border forces frequently found themselves in a conflict with each other.

In early December, clashes broke out between border security forces of the Taliban and Iran, which were triggered, according to the Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid, by "confusion about the border demarcation". Nevertheless, Iranian officials named the Taliban forces as the instigator of the clashes. Despite being one of the few countries that kept its embassy functioning after the Taliban takeover, Iran has not yet official recognized the Taliban government, and transborder disputes and grievances between Afghanistan and Iran have a long history, with drug-trafficking, refugees, religious militancy and the water dispute over the Helmand River being the principal reasons of tension. Besides, historically, Iran retained close ties with Tajik and Hazara minorities within Afghanistan, which at times instigated strife with predominantly Pashtun Taliban, as it happened in 1998. Both in the case of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border and the Afghanistan-Iran border, the tribal and ethnic composition and identification of the transborder regions, as well as the colonial legacy of the border formation, undermine the recognition and inviolability of the border, adding their share to the ongoing problem. Historically, the Taliban leadership was eager to employ the idea of the independent "Pashtunistan" (the land of Pashtuns), which goes hand in hand with their unwillingness to recognize the Durand line, exacerbating lingering border disputes. Similarly, trans-national Baloch tribes were noted for the perception of the existing Afghan-Iranian border a divisive, rather than separative structure, as they seem not to regard the geography of their settlement in terms of national borders and visit relatives or trade across the borders of Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan. On top of this, both Pakistan and Iran host

the largest Afghan communities in the world, as the number of officially registered Afghan refugees alone in these two countries far exceeded 2.2 million.

Meanwhile, the border conflicts do not seem to slow down in any way, as the first days of the new year were marked by armed clashes at the Afghan-Turkmen border. According to the Khaama Press, the largest online news agency in Afghanistan, on January 3, 2022, Afghan border guards engaged in armed confrontation with the border troops of Turkmenistan in Khumab district of the Jawzjan province of Afghanistan a few days after an Afghan who "mistakenly crossed the border" was shot dead by Turkmen troops, while another Afghan citizen was allegedly arrested and buried alive. According to the head of the Taliban's Information Department, the sustained exchange of fire was initiated by the Turkmen border guards, which opened fire at Taliban forces who came to the area to investigate the death of an Afghan citizen shot dead by the Turkmen forces. This is not the first armed clash at the Afghan-Turkmen border, as 25 Turkmen soldiers were reported killed in 2018 at the Afghan-Turkmen border, although the assailants were not the Taliban troops and were linked with drug-traffickers. Nevertheless, the conflict seems a bit out of line with the active engagement and contacts between the Turkmen government and the Taliban regime, especially considering economic interests of Turkmenistan through the realization of vital energy projects such as the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan (TAP) power transmission line and potential Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline project.

In the meantime, Afghanistan's border with Tajikistan still retains its urgency and tension, as the Tajik government refuses to recognize or even communicate with the Taliban regime, unless the large Tajik population of Afghanistan is represented in the new Afghan government, while the Taliban demand the military aircraft of the Afghan air force to be returned to Afghanistan. Along with the existence of the large Tajik minority in Afghanistan, the confrontation is of utmost importance, as unlike Turkmenistan, Tajikistan is a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and hosts a Russian military base, which has been reinforced since the Taliban takeover.

Politics, Foreign Affairs, and Security

- The leaders of India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan attended the first India-Central Asia Summit held in an online format. The Summit came at an opportune time coinciding with the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between India and Central Asian countries. The participants debated prospects for strengthening and broadening cooperation in various spheres between Central Asian nations and India. Following the talks, the parties adopted the Declaration of the summit (Mea.gov.in, 27.01.2022).
- The National Security Council of Türkiye called for the de-escalation of tensions between Russia and Ukraine. Following the meeting at the presidential complex in the capital Ankara, the Turkish President and the Chairman of the Council stated that the escalation is not in the interest of anyone. Prior to that, President Erdogan had proposed to host the leaders of Russia and Ukraine to “pave the way for re-establishing peace” (Anadolu Agency, 27.01.2022).
- The Presidents of China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan took part in the China-Central Asia summit, which was held online. The event was timed to the 30 anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations. The participants discussed cooperation in a wide range of areas. Among other things, the Chinese leader expressed his intention to bring trade turnover between China and Central Asia to \$70 billion by 2030 (Eurasianet.org, 26.01.2022).
- At the extraordinary 21st Congress of Kazakhstan’s ruling party Nur Otan, President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev was elected as its Chairman. Earlier, Kazakhstan’s first President Elbasy Nursultan Nazarbayev proposed to elect Kassym-Jomart Tokayev as Chairman of the party. The Congress of the party was conducted in an online format with the participation of 389 delegates. Congress also considered the issue of introducing changes to the membership of the Political Council of the Party (Kazinform, 28.01.2022).
- Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan had another border conflict, following which the Chairman of the State Committee for National Security of Kyrgyzstan Kamchybek Tashiev and his Tajik counterpart Saimumin Yatimov held a meeting. After the meeting, the parties announced that they decided to resume the work of the inter-governmental commission on delimitation and demarcation of borders, as the work of the commission was suspended 2 months ago. It is important to note that Tashiev and Yatimov didn’t sign any documents (Kabar, 29.01.2022).
- According to the Russian Ambassador to Tajikistan Igor Lyakin-Frolov, supplies of Russian weapons and combat vehicles will help Tajikistan to strengthen its army’s combat readiness. In 2021, Russia supplied Tajikistan military hardware, equipment, weapons and munitions to modernize its armed forces. These deliveries strengthened the protection of hard-to-reach mountain sections of the Tajik-Afghan border. Russia and Tajikistan are also implementing a joint project for the construction of a state-of-the-art border checkpoint at the border with Afghanistan (TASS, 29.01.2022).

Economy, Finance, and Energy

- The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development announced that Kazakhstan’s energy sector would reach carbon neutrality by 2060. The institution will cooperate with the government of Kazakhstan in developing a long-term strategy. In 2021, the EBRD invested \$630 million in 18 domestic projects. Almost half of them are classified as ‘green’. Since independence, Kazakhstan has attracted more than \$370 billion of investments (Qazaq TV, 28.01.2022).
- The Ministry of Energy of Uzbekistan recently announced that there were cases of violations of technological processes at existing gas fields and oil refineries. This situation led to a reduction in gas production, which negatively affected the volume of electricity generation. Correspondingly, the energy supply indicators of the regions are changing due to an increase in energy consumption and an imbalance between consumption and the production of electricity. However, the electricity supply in some regions including the capital city of Tashkent was fully restored (UzDaily, 26.01.2022).
- Ambassador of Kyrgyzstan to Iran Turdakun Sydykov recently met with the Energy Minister of Iran Ali-Akbar Mehrabian. Sydykov informed the Iranian minister about the hydropower potential of Kyrgyzstan and presented several investment projects, including the construction of medium and small hydropower plants in regions of Kyrgyzstan. Ali-Akbar Mehrabian expressed the readiness of the Iranian side to cooperate with Kyrgyzstan as Iranian companies have extensive experience in the construction of hydropower plants both in Iran and abroad (Kabar, 26.01.2022).
- The Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan Rashid Meredov had a telephone conversation with his Indian counterpart Subrahmanyam Jaishankar. The parties discussed a wide range of issues, including trade and economic cooperation. The parties exchanged views on the progress of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline construction project, stressing the need to intensify work at the bilateral and multilateral levels by the speedy implementation of the agreements reached at the highest state level (Turkmenportal, 25.01.2022).
- The Parliament of Tajikistan recently considered an interstate agreement with Turkmenistan on railway cooperation. Members of the Parliament mentioned that the ratification of the Agreement would increase the level of international transport services and volume of bilateral trade. The agreement also contributes to the strengthening of bilateral cooperation by using transit railways and the Turkmen port of Turkmenbashi across the Caspian Sea. The corresponding committees of the Parliament supported the ratification of the Agreement in their conclusions (ASIA-Plus, 24.01.2022).
- According to data from the Gazprom Export, Gazprom delivered a record volume of gas to Türkiye via the Blue Stream gas pipeline in 2021. In particular, the company supplied 15.98 billion cubic meters of gas, which was the best annual result since the beginning of the operation of the pipeline in 2003. The growth in supplies coincided with a historical record of gas consumption in Türkiye, which was estimated at 61 bcm in 2021 (TASS, 28.01.2022).

Society and Culture

- The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) organized the first Business Turkish and Turkish by Areas of Specialization Course in Uzbekistan as part of the Business Education Program (İŞDEP). The training program was found to be useful for students who would like to study or work in Türkiye. Good command of Business Turkish is expected to contribute to the development of economic activities and cooperation between Türkiye and Uzbekistan (Tika.gov.tr, 28.01.2022).
- The Consulate General of Uzbekistan in Istanbul and the Association for the Rights of Uzbek Women signed a memorandum of cooperation in protecting the rights of Uzbek women in Türkiye. Previously, as a result of cooperation, in a short period of time more than 30 women have received targeted assistance. The document will help in preventing human trafficking, restoration of wages, the provision of temporary jobs etc. The parties agreed on an action plan to bring the existing cooperation to a new legal level (ASIA-Plus, 24.01.2022).
- According to the Russian state statistics service Rosstat, the population of Russia declined by more than half a million in 2021. Preliminary estimates have shown that in January 2022 Russia had a population of 145.5 million, which is nearly 700 thousand fewer people than a year earlier. The previous maximum population loss was set exactly 20 years ago, in 2002, when the population decreased by 686 thousand people. The unusual population decline was related to the COVID-19 pandemic (Rferl.org, 29.01.2022).
- The Ambassador of Kyrgyzstan to Türkiye Kubanychbek Omuraliev met with Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Türkiye Yavuz Selim Kiran. The sides discussed the topical issues of bilateral cooperation, including the protection of the rights and interests of citizens of the Kyrgyz Republic. Along with this, the Kyrgyz side made a proposal on the possibility of crossing the borders of the two countries on the basis of an internal passport of a citizen (identity card) (Kabar, 26.01.2022).
- According to the state and public security department at the National Institute for Strategic Studies of Ukraine, between 350,000 and 2.5 million Ukrainians have both Russian and Ukrainian citizenships. Most of them live in Crimea and Donbas. Moreover, from 5 to 10% of Ukrainian citizens have some other foreign citizenship alongside, and about 5 million people work abroad and have the prospect of obtaining citizenship. In particular, it is known that 130,000 Ukrainians have Hungarian citizenship, and up to 100,000 have Romanian citizenship (Ukrinform.net, 26.01.2022).
- Kazakhstan resumed air travel with 25 countries. Currently, there are 605 scheduled flights on 57 domestic routes. International flights to Kazakhstan have been almost completely resumed. The list of countries includes Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Germany, Hungary, India, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Maldives, Netherlands, Poland, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Tajikistan, Thailand, Türkiye, UAE, UK, Ukraine, Uzbekistan and Vietnam (The Astana Times, 29.01.2022).