Imperial maps, Pak-Afghan war, and a way forward

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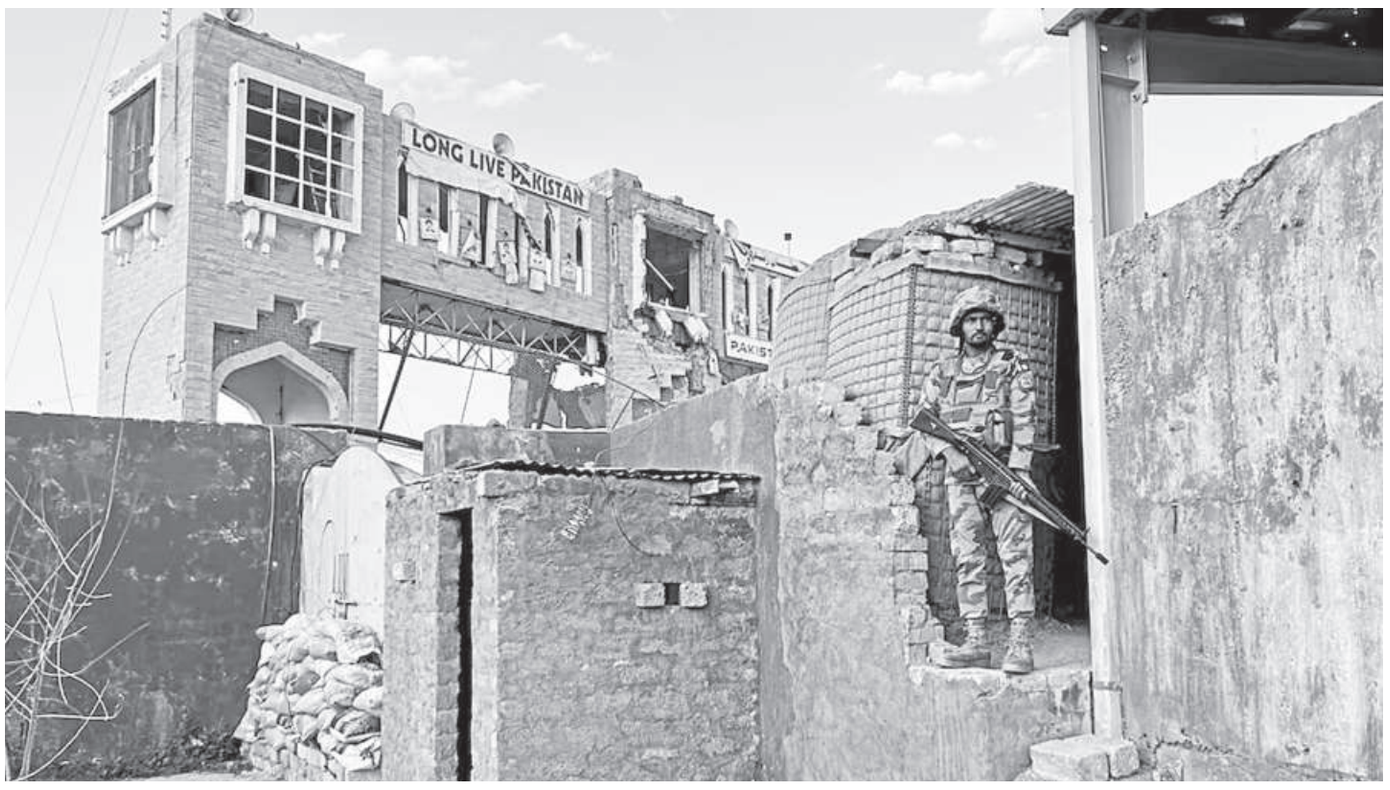
The latest round of fighting between Afghanistan and Pakistan did not begin with one airstrike or one angry speech on social media. When Pakistan's defence minister publicly spoke of an "open war" with Kabul after Pakistani jets bombed targets in Kabul and Kandahar, it sounded like a sudden eruption. In reality, it is another flare-up in a conflict whose roots go back to British imperial map-making in the 19th century, the politics of Pashtun identity, and decades of proxy wars that both states have used and then lost control over.

Afghanistan was one of the first states in the region to be shaped as a modern territorial buffer. Its present borders were not drawn mainly by Afghans but by British and Russian officials during the Great Game. They wanted a cushion between Tsarist Russia and British India, not a stable homeland for the peoples who actually lived there. Through a series of treaties, they carved out a landlocked Afghanistan, cut many Pashtun communities in half, and left the new state dependent on its neighbours for trade and access to the sea. The Durand Line of 1893, agreed between Sir Mortimer Durand and Amir Abdur Rahman, sliced right through Pashtun tribal lands. For the British, it was a frontier. For many Afghans, it was a temporary administrative line that was never meant to become a permanent international border.

Things became even more complicated in 1947. When Pakistan was created, Afghanistan was the only country to vote against its admission to the United Nations. Kabul refused to formally recognise the Durand Line and began to talk about "Pashtunistan" – an imagined homeland for Pashtuns on both sides of the frontier. For Pakistan, trying to consolidate its western border while already locked in rivalry with India, this looked like an existential threat. Relations between Kabul and Islamabad were born with a built-in trust deficit.

Cold War politics added another poisonous layer. During the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Pakistan became the main staging ground for mujahideen groups backed by the United States and Saudi Arabia. For the Pakistani security establishment, supporting Afghan fighters and later the Taliban was part of a bigger strategy: to gain "strategic depth" against India by having a friendly or dependent regime in Kabul. That logic survived into the 1990s when the first Taliban government came to power with heavy Pakistani support. It was a short-term success that turned into long-term blowback.



An army soldier stands guard at the Friendship Gate in Chaman, Pakistan, after cross-border fire between Pakistani and Afghan forces on February 27, 2026.
PHOTO: REUTERS

The same militant networks that Pakistan had helped nurture across the Durand Line did not stay in neat boxes. Out of the jihad infrastructure and the radicalisation in the tribal belt came the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). By the late 2000s the TTP was waging war on the Pakistani state itself, bombing schools, mosques, army bases, markets and police stations. Today, different estimates suggest that TTP and allied groups can field tens of thousands of fighters spread across the border areas. From Islamabad's perspective, the biggest security threat now comes not from India alone but from these groups sheltering in or moving through Afghan territory.

The return of the Afghan Taliban to power in Kabul in 2021 changed the balance again. Pakistan's generals initially hoped that a friendly Taliban government would help control the TTP. Instead, many Pakistani Taliban leaders relocated across the border and gained new space. A brief ceasefire between the TTP and Pakistan collapsed, and attacks inside Pakistan rose. Afghan Taliban officials publicly promised not to let anyone use their soil against other countries, but on the ground, TTP cadres kept posting videos from Afghan districts and claiming responsibility for attacks in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. Pakistan felt betrayed by a movement it had once supported.

From 2022 onwards, Pakistani forces carried out airstrikes inside Afghan territory several times, targeting what they said were TTP bases. Afghan authorities accused them of killing civilians and violating sovereignty. There were cross-border raids, artillery duels and temporary closures of key crossings like Torkham and Spin Boldak. By late 2025 and early 2026, the clashes had become more intense.

On paper there is no doubt that Pakistan holds much greater conventional military power. It has a large standing army, tanks, fighter jets, drones and nuclear weapons. Afghanistan under the Taliban has a much smaller force, mostly light infantry and limited air capability, with no navy and no nuclear deterrent. Pakistan can also hurt Afghanistan in quieter but equally painful ways: closing borders, restricting trade, cutting off banking channels, or deporting Afghan refugees. As a landlocked country that depends heavily on its neighbours for transit and on aid for its fragile economy, Afghanistan is extremely vulnerable to such pressure.

But power is not just about numbers and hardware. The Taliban also have levers that can deeply hurt Pakistan. Allowing TTP and other groups to use Afghan soil as safe havens means that they can continue to bleed the Pakistani state with relatively low cost. Even if Kabul does not formally endorse their operations, a blind eye is often enough. Guerrilla attacks on remote Pakistani outposts have a disproportionate psychological impact. For an army that prides itself on controlling the country, the image of Afghanistan-linked militants raising their flag on Pakistani soil is a humiliation.

Every Pakistani bomb that lands on Afghan soil may weaken Kabul militarily but it also deepens the story that Islamabad is an enemy of Pashtuns, not just of one regime.

The fighting therefore moves in circles. Pakistan hits suspected TTP or Taliban positions; Afghan leaders publicly condemn the strikes and quietly tolerate or encourage retaliatory attacks across the border; Pakistani security forces respond with more operations; and ordinary people are displaced or killed on both sides. Each round leaves more bitterness, shrinks the space for dialogue, and strengthens hardliners who argue that "the other side only understands force."

This conflict is not sealed off from the rest of the region. India quietly watches Pakistan's western border heat up while its own Line of Control with Pakistan stays relatively quieter. For New Delhi, a Pakistan stuck in a two-front security dilemma is not necessarily bad news. China, on the other hand, worries that instability in Pakistan and Afghanistan will threaten its Belt and Road investments, especially the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and potential mining deals in Afghanistan. It wants Pakistan strong enough to protect Chinese workers and Afghan Taliban leaders serious enough to curb any group that might fuel militancy in neighbouring Xinjiang. Russia and the United States, despite being rivals, also do not want another full-scale regional war that can create fresh space for transnational jihadist networks.

A full traditional war, with large armies crossing the Durand Line, is still unlikely. Pakistan knows that invading Afghanistan would be a nightmare: the terrain is unforgiving, the Taliban are experienced guerrilla fighters, and any occupation would trigger wider regional reactions. The Taliban also know they cannot defeat Pakistan's army or survive sustained bombing of their main cities and ministries without massive damage. What is much more probable is a continuing pattern of "low intensity, high impact" conflict.

At the heart of all this lies a set of unresolved questions. Will Afghanistan ever formally recognise the Durand Line, or will it continue to treat it as an imposed colonial border? Can Pakistan accept that its project of using Islamist groups as foreign policy tools has produced enemies it can no longer control? Will both sides find a way to speak honestly about Pashtun grievances on both sides of the line without turning them into weapons? Without movement on these basic issues, every new government in Kabul or Islamabad will inherit the same script.

Madhabdi rape: Will justice prevail or be forgotten again?

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Recently, in Narsingdi's Madhabdi upazila, a father watched his teenage daughter being dragged away into the night. The next morning, she was found dead in a crop field. Between those two moments stretched the familiar distance between crime and consequence in Bangladesh—a distance measured not in miles but in indifference. The question here is not whether the authorities will go through the motions of justice. They most likely will. The real question is whether justice will ultimately prevail.

Bangladesh has been here before. Too many times. In 2020, the gang rape of a woman in Noakhali sparked nationwide protests after a video of the assault went viral, which eventually forced the then government to introduce the death penalty for rape under the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act. It was hailed as a turning point by some who believed that harsher punishment would deter criminals. The law changed. The frequency of rape incidents, however, did not.

The Madhabdi case carries additional layers that make it more uncomfortable. There have been allegations of prior sexual violence, and of local arbitration. There have been claims of threats to leave the area as well as whispers of political shielding. All of this sounds painfully familiar. When rape becomes a "matter" to be settled locally, often through informal arbitration led by influential figures, the crime is transformed from a violation of a human being into a negotiable dispute. Money changes hands, silence is purchased, and the message that predators get is that power can be leveraged to manage consequences.

We often hear that families do not report rape because of social stigma. That is true. But it is also incomplete. Many families do not report because they know what awaits them if they do: endless court dates, social ostracisation, character assassination of the victim, financial exhaustion, threats from the accused. In rural and semi-urban areas, where political patronage networks frequently intersect with law enforcement and local governance, seeking justice can mean inviting retaliation, as it did in the case of the Madhabdi teenager. That detail should haunt us.

We must confront an uncomfortable truth attached to this pattern of violence: rape in Bangladesh is not only a crime of individual pathology; it is often a crime of impunity. The perpetrator calculates risk. If he believes that his political connections, local influence, or financial leverage can neutralise the law, the deterrent effect of even the death penalty becomes abstract. A harsh sentence written in the statute book means little if the path to that sentence is obstructed by delay, compromise, or intimidation.

It is common knowledge that the judiciary is heavily burdened. Hundreds of thousands of cases remain pending in courts across the country, including thousands under the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act. Special tribunals were established to expedite these cases, but delays remain chronic nonetheless. Trials stretch for years. For victims, each adjournment is another wound. Public outrage, meanwhile, is seasonal. We trend for a week, we light candles, we march, we post hashtags. But then another headline replaces the last, and we forget. This collective amnesia is perhaps the most dangerous thing.

When the death penalty for rape was introduced in 2020, many warned that punishment alone would not solve structural problems. They were right. Data since then has shown that rape incidents have not declined in any meaningful measure. Harsh punishment without the certainty of conviction is a hollow threat. Criminological research across jurisdictions consistently shows that the certainty of punishment deters crime more effectively than the severity of it. If the probability of conviction is perceived as low, the fear of death becomes distant.

There is also the matter of local power structures. In many areas, informal arbitration remains a parallel justice system. It can resolve land disputes or family conflicts, but when it ventures into criminal territory, it can be an instrument of coercion as well. The Madhabdi case suggests that local figures attempted to mediate or suppress an earlier assault. If true, this is not an isolated aberration. In the past, the media has often reported instances where rape survivors were pressured into "compromise," sometimes even forced into marriage with their rapists. What does it say about a society when a teenager is assaulted, threatened, abducted in front of her father, and murdered, all within a context of prior warnings?

Reportedly, the police have since arrested several suspects, including the prime accused. But arrest is not justice. Justice requires a transparent investigation, protection for witnesses, forensic integrity, and a trial conducted without any external interference. Justice also requires accountability for anyone who attempts to shield the accused or obstruct due process. If local leaders in Madhabdi indeed facilitated intimidation or financial settlement, their liability must be examined with the same seriousness as the primary perpetrators. Otherwise, we are merely pruning branches while watering the roots.

There is also a deeper cultural dimension. Patriarchal attitudes continue to shape social responses to rape in our country. Victims are frequently scrutinised. Their mobility is questioned, their clothing discussed, and their character dissected. Even when outrage erupts, it often centres on the brutality of the act rather than the everyday entitlement that precedes it. Boys grow up watching how power operates. They observe how influential men remain untouchable by the law. They internalise lessons about dominance and consequence.

Will the Madhabdi case prove to be a difference? The answer is that it depends less on public emotion and more on institutional resolve. If the investigation remains insulated from political pressure, if forensic evidence is properly collected and preserved, if the prosecution is diligent, and if the trial is concluded within a reasonable timeframe, then perhaps this case could become a good precedent. Otherwise, the case risks joining the ever-expanding archive of grief and fading into oblivion. So, what shall it be?