

## **The Durand Line**

### **Introduction**

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The US-led military invasion of Afghanistan, mission “Enduring Freedom”, started 7 October 2001 and catapulted one region of Asia that had seemed to have been forgotten since the end of the Cold War into the forefront of political awareness. However, 12 years later, in 2013, it was more than obvious that the intervention had not achieved the outcomes which were once expected of it. Although US-Special Forces killed Osama bin Laden in the Pakistan city of Abbottabad on 2 May 2011, al-Qaida, the Taliban and other militant Islamist groups are still prevalent in the region and have the potential to revitalize after the withdrawal of international troops.

A particular reason for the continuous resistance of militant Islamists is the porous border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Already since late 2001 the US military has been aware that militant Islamists elude US and NATO troops by slipping across the border into Pakistan. The assessment of international experts as well as the Kabul government is that the violent conflict in Afghanistan will continue as long as this international border has not been sealed and Pakistan offers militants a safe haven. The view from the Pakistani perspective is, of course, different: Islamabad denies that its territory, and in particular the tribal areas that border Afghanistan, are safe havens for militant Islamists. On the contrary, it accuses Kabul of destabilizing the region by exporting militant Islamism to Pakistan. As the accusations between the two countries underline, there is a bigger story behind the allegation of tolerating or instrumentalizing militant Islamists.

The elephant in the room is the border dispute over the so-called Durand Line, which separates Afghanistan and Pakistan: Afghanistan has never recognized the Durand Line as its southeastern border. This dispute

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dates to the late nineteenth century and embraces a complex set of contradictory interpretations of political dynamics. These constitute the thematic focus of this issue of the *International Quarterly for Asian Studies*. The journal includes articles initially presented as papers at the Twenty-First European Conference on South Asian Studies (ECSAS) in Bonn in July 2010. While the contributors to this issue take different academic approaches and concentrate on different time sequences, their contributions make it clear that the conflict is not only one between two neighboring states. Rather, the contributions reveal different layers of this conflict, which all need to be taken into account simultaneously. One is the ongoing conflict between tribe and state, which has a deep impact on the border issue. In addition, one has to consider the conflicts between Pashtun and Baluch ethnic identities on the one hand and the creation of national identities on the other. Both, the tribal and the ethnic dimensions of this conflict, have translated into specific centre vs. periphery relationships, as the contributions of Jakob Rösel and Conrad Schetter show.

Moreover, as in many other conflicts around the world, the dispute over the Durand Line has its roots in the colonial era, in this case British India, and particular the dissolution of the Britain's colonial empire. The article of Elena Giunchi shows impressively how the British Indian policy paved the way for this border conflict. The contributions of Wiqar Ali Shah and of Christian Wagner and Amina Khan continue this historical perspective by focusing on both Pakistani and Afghan politics regarding the Durand Line dispute after 1947. It is no coincidence that the Durand Line was a hotspot of both the Cold War in the 1980s and the War on Terror in the 2000s.

While all authors highlight different facets of this border – from legal and military aspects through to smuggling and refugee issues – they share the view that a solution to this conflict does not appear likely in near future. One convincing argument is that nearly all political stakeholders have found a way to benefit from the status quo. The governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan show a strong interest in maintaining a relatively “open” border in order to be able to infiltrate politics on the other side of the fence, and the tribes use the porous border not only to oppose the governments, but also to benefit from smuggling. With this in mind, one can be certain that world politics has not heard the last of the dispute over the Durand Line.