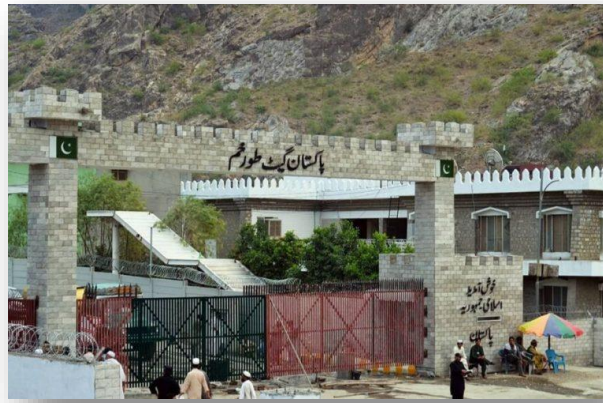


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CLOSURE OF THE TORKHAM GATE: CAUSES AND IMPACTS



Weekly Analysis is one of the CSRS publications analyzing significant weekly political, social, economic, and security events in Afghanistan and the region. The prime motive behind this is to provide strategic insights and policy solutions to decision-making institutions and individuals in order to help them design better policies. Weekly Analysis is published in Pashto, Dari, English and Arabic languages.



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Center for Strategic and Regional Studies (CSRS)



CLOSURE OF THE TORKHAM GATE: CAUSES AND IMPACTS

Introduction

Since the Islamic Emirate came to power in August 2021, tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan have repeatedly surfaced at Torkham and Spin Boldak. These tensions have led to the closure of these key crossings, disrupting both trade and the movement of people. As a result, businesses on both sides have suffered financial losses.

In February 2023, the Islamic Emirate closed the Torkham gate to all types of movement and trade. The closure lasted for three days, bringing trade between the two countries to a halt and negatively impacting economic relations. According to Syed Zia-ul-Haq Sarhadi, the President of the Pakistan-Afghanistan Joint Chamber of Commerce and Industry, around 6,000 trucks and trailers were stranded on both sides during this period, causing millions of dollars in losses. Afghan officials stated that the closure was a response to Pakistan's failure to uphold its commitments regarding transit trade and the passage of patients seeking medical treatment.

To address these trade and transit issues, Afghanistan's Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi and Pakistan's Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari met in Islamabad in May 2023. They agreed to expand bilateral trade, cooperate in counterterrorism efforts, and resolve ongoing disputes.

Despite this, the gate was closed again in November 2023 by Pakistani forces. This time, the closure was triggered by a dispute when Pakistani authorities demanded that Afghan drivers present visas and passports, leading to a confrontation with Afghan forces. As tensions escalated, Pakistan shut the gate.

As of February 21, 2025, the Torkham gate remains closed. This ongoing closure has further strained relations between the two countries and has caused Afghan traders to suffer financial losses amounting to millions of Afghanis. This analysis will examine the reasons behind the closure and its broader consequences.

CAUSES OF THE TORKHAM GATE CLOSURE

There are multiple reasons behind the closure of the Torkham gate, some of which are discussed below:

1. Construction of Military Checkpoints



Both Afghanistan and Pakistan have been trying to establish military checkpoints along the Durand Line, with Pakistan taking the lead in this effort. Pakistan's main objectives for building these checkpoints include:

First, Pakistan has long claimed that anti-Pakistan groups operate from inside Afghanistan, where they receive training and then cross the Durand Line to launch attacks in Pakistan. To monitor and prevent such movements, Pakistan has been constructing military checkpoints in the area.

Second, Pakistan aims to assert its authority over the Durand Line and demonstrate to both the Afghan side and the international community that it considers this line a formal boundary between the two countries. By maintaining these military installations, Pakistan seeks to reinforce its control over the region.

One of the key reasons the Afghan government has cited for closing the Torkham gate is the construction of military checkpoints by Pakistani forces near the crossing. Afghan officials argue that, according to previous agreements, any new construction by either side should be communicated in advance. However, Pakistani forces reportedly began building a checkpoint without prior notification, which led to tensions.

Similar disputes have arisen in the past, resulting in clashes at the Torkham gate. In some cases, Pakistani authorities have also accused Afghan forces of constructing military checkpoints without informing them, leading to reactions from the Pakistani side and subsequent closures of the gate.

2. Security Concerns

One of the main reasons behind the closure of the Torkham Gate is Pakistan's security concerns. Pakistani authorities claim that members of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and its supporters enter Pakistan from Afghanistan and carry out attacks. They also allege that the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan provides shelter to TTP fighters, and supports their operations against Pakistan and that even Afghan Taliban members have joined TTP in its fight against the Pakistani government. According to Pakistan, many of these movements take place through the Torkham gate.

Pakistani investigations suggest that the return of the Islamic Emirate to power has strengthened TTP, encouraging the group to escalate its attacks in pursuit of establishing an Islamic system in Pakistan. Official statistics indicate that between August 2021 and August 2023, TTP attacks in Pakistan increased by 60%, resulting in the deaths of more than 2,300 Pakistani military personnel and civilians. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa alone, over 300 attacks were reported, most of which were attributed to TTP.



Reports from the South Asia Terrorism Portal indicate that in 2023, Pakistan experienced 418 attacks, compared to 365 attacks in 2022. Meanwhile, Al Jazeera reported that the total number of attacks across Pakistan in 2023 reached 650.

One of the deadliest incidents occurred in July 2023, when an attack on a gathering in Bajaur killed over 54 people. Following the attack, Pakistan's military leadership, including Army Chief General Asim Munir, claimed that Afghan nationals were involved and had crossed over from Afghanistan to carry out the assault. Senior Pakistani officials blamed the Islamic Emirate for failing to control armed groups and prevent their movement across the Durand Line.

The Islamic Emirate has strongly denied these allegations. Afghanistan's Foreign Minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi, dismissed the accusations as anti-Emirate propaganda, insisting that no group inside Afghanistan poses a threat to regional security. The spokesperson for the Islamic Emirate, Zabihullah Mujahid, also rejected Pakistan's claims, stating:

"Instead of strengthening its security, Pakistan is once again blaming Afghanistan. The Islamic Emirate does not support such attacks; rather, it condemns them. However, it is not Afghanistan's responsibility to prevent attacks in Pakistan—Pakistan must ensure its security."

Ultimately, Pakistan's security concerns remain one of the reasons behind the closure of the Torkham gate. Pakistani authorities believe that individuals involved in attacks inside Pakistan have used this route to enter the country, prompting them to shut the gate during times of heightened security threats. However, Afghan officials consistently reject these claims, asserting that Afghan soil has never been used against Pakistan and that the Afghan government has no involvement in attacks occurring within Pakistan.

It is important to note that while Pakistan frequently cites security concerns as a reason for tensions at the Torkham Gate, this explanation is often seen as a political tool. Many believe that militant groups operating in Pakistan are already based within the country and, in rare cases where individuals might cross from Afghanistan, they are unlikely to use official crossings like Torkham. Instead, they would take unofficial smuggling routes. This suggests that the closure of the Torkham gate due to security concerns may be more of a pressure tactic by Pakistan to push Afghanistan into accepting certain demands.

3. Political Pressure

The closure of the Torkham gate is often seen as a way for Pakistan to pressure Afghanistan. Since the Islamic Emirate took power, Pakistan has repeatedly asked Afghan authorities to take strong action against Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) or at least mediate between them. Although the Islamic Emirate did attempt mediation, leading to a temporary agreement, the deal did not last long.



Pakistan continues to seek ways to pressure the Islamic Emirate to either cut ties with TTP or dismantle its bases inside Afghanistan. One of the ways Pakistan applies this pressure is by closing the Torkham gate or creating obstacles for Afghan travelers, making movement across the crossing difficult.

4. Economic Pressure

Another reason for the frequent closure of the Torkham Gate is economic pressure. Pakistan has used this strategy to influence Afghanistan's economy, particularly targeting Afghan traders.

It has been observed that when Pakistan's fruit and vegetable harvest season begins, the gate remains open, making it easier for Pakistani goods to enter Afghanistan. However, when it is Afghanistan's turn to export its fresh produce, various restrictions suddenly arise.

Afghan truck drivers face challenges such as strict passport and visa requirements, excessive inspections, and unnecessary delays in processing their documents. In some cases, Pakistan shuts down the gate entirely, leaving Afghan trucks stuck for days. As a result, perishable goods like fruits and vegetables spoil before reaching the market, causing significant financial losses to Afghan traders.

This pattern suggests that Pakistan is using the Torkham Gate as a tool to pressure Afghanistan, both politically and economically, to achieve its own strategic goals.

IMPACT ON POLITICAL RELATIONS BETWEEN AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN

During the first rule of the Islamic Emirate, Afghanistan and Pakistan maintained close ties. Pakistan was among the few countries, alongside the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia that recognized the Islamic Emirate. When the Emirate returned to power in 2021, Pakistan initially welcomed the change, seeing it as an opportunity to reduce India's influence in Afghanistan and strengthen its relations with the new government.

Pakistan handed over Afghanistan's embassy in Islamabad to the Islamic Emirate and kept its embassy open in Kabul. Officials from both sides frequently visited each other's countries, and there were high hopes that their relationship would remain strong.

However, recent tensions at key crossings, especially Torkham, have negatively impacted political and economic relations between the two countries.

One major political consequence is the shift in Pakistan's stance towards the Islamic Emirate on the international stage. Previously, Pakistan had defended the Emirate in global forums,



cooperated with regional countries to strengthen Afghanistan's government, and avoided actions that could harm its legitimacy or prevent its recognition.

However, as relations soured, Pakistan began accusing the Islamic Emirate of supporting Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and allowing Afghan soil to be used against Pakistan. Islamabad has also raised concerns about governance and human rights in Afghanistan at regional meetings.

Recently, Pakistan hosted a gathering of Islamic scholars focused on girls' education, using the event to emphasize that female education is an obligation in Islam. This was seen as an attempt to put additional pressure on the Islamic Emirate.

In summary, the repeated closures of the Torkham gate and conflicts at these crossings have significantly strained the political relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

ECONOMIC IMPACT ON AFGHANISTAN-PAKISTAN RELATIONS

The closure of the Torkham crossing has significantly affected economic ties between Afghanistan and Pakistan, particularly in three key areas: bilateral trade, transit trade, and financial losses.

1. Negative Impact on Bilateral Trade

The closure of Torkham has had a direct negative effect on trade between the two countries. Crossing closures and increasing tensions not only cause financial losses but also disrupt trade flows. A comparison of trade volumes from the early years of the Islamic Emirate's rule to 2024 shows a clear decline, largely due to growing Torkham and Spin Boldak disputes in 2023, which continued to impact trade in 2024. Many traders have sought alternative routes or reduced their business activities due to the risk of financial loss.

In 2022 (1401 in the Islamic calendar), the total trade volume between Afghanistan and Pakistan was \$2.34 billion. This increased slightly to \$2.5 billion in 2023 (1402). However, in 2024 (1403), reports from Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs indicate that trade dropped sharply to \$1.6 billion, with the extended closure of Torkham now lasting around 20 days being a major contributing factor. If this trend continues, bilateral trade could decline even further in 2025.

2. Impact on Transit Trade

In 2010, Afghanistan and Pakistan signed the Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA), a 58-article agreement allowing both countries access to each other's territory for transit trade. Under this agreement:



Afghanistan has transit access to three major Pakistani ports (Karachi, Gwadar, and Qasim) and trade routes to China (via Sust/Tashkurgan) and India (via the Wagah border).

Pakistan can use Afghan territory to reach Iran (via Islam Qala and Zaranj), Uzbekistan (via Hairatan), Tajikistan (via Sher Khan), and Turkmenistan (via Aqina and Torghundi).

In practice, Afghanistan primarily relies on Torkham to access Karachi and Gwadar, while Pakistan depends on the same route for trade with Central Asia. Therefore, any prolonged closure of Torkham or increased tensions along this route severely disrupts transit trade and negatively impacts the economic relationship between the two countries.

3. Financial Losses

The closure of Torkham Gate has caused significant financial losses for traders on both sides. In 2023, Sayed Zia-ul-Haq Sardar, head of the Pakistan-Afghanistan Joint Chamber of Commerce and Industry, reported that 6,000 trucks were stranded on both sides of the Crossings, leading to millions of dollars in losses.

More recent estimates further highlight the scale of economic damage. According to Yousaf Afridi, president of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Chamber of Commerce, as of February 21, 2025, Pakistan has lost nearly \$15 million due to the Torkham Gate closure. Similarly, Shakerullah Safi, executive director of the Nangarhar Chamber of Commerce, stated that Afghan traders are losing \$500,000 per day. Over the past 20 days, Afghanistan has suffered approximately \$10 million in losses, bringing the total financial damage for both sides to \$25 million.

Such significant economic losses could severely strain Afghanistan-Pakistan economic relations, making future cooperation more difficult.

CONCLUSION

The Torkham Gate serves as a strategic and vital route for both Pakistan and Afghanistan. It holds significant importance for transit, trade, and customs revenue for both nations. However, due to security concerns, the construction of military installations, and occasional pressure from the Pakistani government, the Torkham Gate has been closed. This closure has resulted in significant human and financial losses for both sides. In the past 20 days alone, the Pakistani side has suffered an estimated loss of \$15 million, while the Afghan side has faced a loss of nearly \$10 million. Beyond the financial impact, such incidents at the Torkham Gate have strained the political relations between the two countries. Deteriorating relations with a neighboring country inevitably have negative consequences on the security and economic stability of both nations. As a well-established principle in international relations



states: "You cannot change your geography or that of your neighbor, but you can change your policies and interactions to build better relations with them."

In summary, the closure of the Torkham Gate is not in the interest of either side. Although a recent tribal jirga (council) was held between the two parties, resulting in a ceasefire, no decision has been made yet to reopen the gate.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Strengthening Political Relations:** Afghanistan should work to strengthen its political ties with Pakistan, a key neighbor, in line with its national interests. The security and stability of both countries depend on maintaining good and cooperative political relations.
2. **Mutual Stability and Trust:** The Afghan government should convince Pakistan that a stable Afghanistan is in the interest of both nations. Afghanistan must assure Pakistan that its territory will never be used against Pakistan, and Pakistan, in turn, should avoid using Afghanistan as a ground for competition with India.
3. **Immediate Reopening of the Gate:** Both sides should prioritize reopening the Torkham Gate to restore transit and trade. This will prevent further economic losses and allow stranded travelers to return to their homes.
4. **Support for Local Communities:** The Pashtun tribes residing on both sides of the Torkham Gate rely on it for trade and livelihoods. Both governments should work together to resolve the issues at the gate, ensuring that these communities can continue their economic activities and have their concerns addressed.

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