

Afghanistan

# Durand Line: Turning the



By C Raja Mohan

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**A**S British and other Western troops pour into Afghanistan to assist the Hamid Karzai government defend itself against a resurgent Taliban and the Al Qaeda along the Durand Line, the Great Game is being turned on its head.

In its relentless 19th Century competition with Czarist Russia for territories and political influence, British India drew the Durand Line between itself and Afghanistan in 1893 to the disadvantage of Kabul and converted the nation into a protectorate.

Today, the West is approaching the Durand

Line from the other side, determined to defend Afghanistan against the incursions from Pakistan, which inherited its western borders from British India after the Partition.

The Bush Administration is increasingly concerned that its political success in Afghanistan could easily be turned into defeat if it does not quickly put down the growing challenge from Taliban. Canadian troops in Kandahar are confronting Taliban attacks; British troops have arrived in Helmand Province in southern Afghanistan. The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation — leading the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan—is expanding military activity to stabilise the provinces along the Durand Line.

While there is hardly any reporting in India on the unfolding war along the Pak-Afghan border, the future of the Durand Line has emerged as the most important geopolitical question in our western neighbourhood.

While the Pakistanis can't stop talking about India's growing profile on its western borders, it is really the international community that has geared itself up to bring stability by use of force on the Durand Line.

**Best of times, worst of times:** In much of Afghanistan, these are the best of times and the worst of times. Four years of relative peace in Afghanistan, after nearly three decades of civil war, have begun to transform the nation.

Returning to Kabul after three years, this reporter found bustling markets and traffic jams. At the same time, insecurity in Afghanistan has dramatically increased.

Even Kabul is no longer immune from attacks by the Taliban. Only last week, a rocket fell right between the Indian ambassador's resi-

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dence and the US Embassy, which are just across the road. Sources in the United Nations and the ISAF concede that the security situation in the country has worsened in the last few months. Security arrangements have tightened at all important sites.

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The impudent Pajeros and Land Cruisers, with their bullet proof protection, that dominate the traffic in Kabul, reflect the new insecurity in the nation.

**Pakistan in a cleft stick:** For the first time in its history, Pakistan now faces serious military pressure on its western borders. During

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the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s, it was Pakistan that was on the offensive on the Durand Line supporting the jihad against the "godless Russian Communists".

Pakistan now faces troops from the US and its allies on the Durand Line. While the troops

are not too many, the West is now turning the heat on Islamabad to do more to curb cross-border activities of Taliban and Al Qaeda.

During his visit to Islamabad last month, President George W Bush publicly applied pressure on Pakistan when he said one of the reasons for his visit was to see whether General Musharraf was keeping his word on Taliban.

NATO sources here say the main objective behind their deployment is to signal to Islamabad that the international community would not abandon Afghanistan and therefore, it is not sensible for Pakistan to keep the Taliban option alive.

Meanwhile, the war in Afghanistan is spilling over into Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan that hug the Durand Line. Areas like Waziristan, that have hardly been administered by any state, have become the natural sanctuaries for Taliban and the Al Qaeda.

Pakistan says it has deployed 70,000 troops near the Durand Line and is actively combating the Taliban and the Al Qaeda; but few in Kabul are willing to accept Islamabad's claims.

**An inspired gambit:** The dilemma of the US is clear. For the Bush Administration, stabilising Afghanistan, which has been declared a strategic partner last year, is of the highest priority.

At the same time, Washington is aware of Pakistan's importance in the great war on terror, Islamabad's ambitions to exercise influence in Afghanistan and the deep distrust of Pakistan in Afghanistan.

Seeking to overcome this contradiction, the US set up a tripartite commission of force commanders and senior officials from the US, Afghanistan and Pakistan, to develop a coordinated strategy against the Taliban and Al Qaeda.

Last week, at the latest round of the tripartite commission in Rawalpindi, the Pakistan's vice army chief, General Ahsan Saleem Hyat, hosted the US commander in Afghanistan, Lieutenant-General Karl Eikenberry, along with Afghan Army Chief General Bismullah Khan for talks in Rawalpindi.

This is the first visit by the Afghan army chief to Pakistan. The three generals also discussed a joint military manoeuvre named "Inspired Gambit 06", to be conducted in May. A unit of Afghan National Army will also take part in these games for the first time at the invitation of Pakistan.

Whether Pakistan offers genuine cooperation or not, one thing is certain. The Durand Line will not be the same again. The big American stake in Afghan success is forcing a military globalisation of the Durand Line that for long has been a lawless frontier. **COURTESY**

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