

Socio-Economic Impact of the Pak-Afghan Border Disputes on the Pashtun Communities

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ABSTRACT

The Pak-Afghan border, or Durand Line, has historically divided Pashtun communities, creating socio-economic and cultural challenges exacerbated by security tensions and military operations. This study examines the socio-economic impact of border disputes on Pashtun populations residing on both sides of the frontier, focusing on trade disruption, employment constraints, access to education and healthcare, and community cohesion. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research integrates structured surveys of 150 households with semi-structured interviews of 30 key informants, including community leaders, educators, and health practitioners. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS, while qualitative responses were thematically coded to capture community perspectives. Findings indicate that border closures, restricted mobility, and periodic military operations significantly disrupt livelihoods, impede education and healthcare access, and strain social networks. Despite these challenges, local communities adopt adaptive strategies, including informal trade networks, communal support systems, and grassroots educational and health initiatives. The study underscores the importance of policy measures that balance security concerns with the socio-economic well-being of border populations, offering insights for development programs, cross-border cooperation, and regional stability.

Keywords: Pak-Afghan border, Pashtun communities, socio-economic impact, trade disruption, border disputes, cross-border mobility, regional stability

INTRODUCTION

The Pak-Afghan border, formally known as the Durand Line, has long been a source of geopolitical tension between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Established in 1893, the border cuts through the traditional homeland of the Pashtun people, dividing communities and affecting cross-border movement, trade, and cultural cohesion (Rashid, 2008). Over the decades, intermittent conflicts, border closures, and military operations have disrupted the socio-economic activities of the Pashtun population living on both sides of the frontier. The rise of insurgency, counterterrorism operations, and restrictions on mobility have created economic hardships, limited access to education and healthcare, and exacerbated social vulnerabilities. This study

examines the socio-economic implications of these border disputes, emphasizing how Pashtun communities navigate challenges imposed by political tensions while maintaining their social and cultural identities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A growing body of literature addresses the socio-economic impact of border conflicts globally and regionally. Lokman, Daud, and Ping (2021) examine how smaller states in South Asia leverage their agency to manage great-power competition, a framework that can be applied to border communities navigating restrictions. Anwar et al. (2020) highlight how Cold War-era dynamics and contemporary geopolitical rivalries exacerbate local economic vulnerabilities. Rashid (2021) emphasizes that border militarization disrupts trade networks, resulting in limited employment opportunities and heightened poverty in affected communities.

Historical perspectives further underscore the social impact on Pashtun populations. Farooq (2019) notes that the partitioning of Pashtun lands created enduring economic and cultural divisions, while Khan (2016) highlights the restrictions on cross-border movement that hinder trade and education. Moreover, studies on refugee flows, displacement, and migration due to security operations reveal the profound effects on community cohesion, livelihood stability, and access to social services (Abdul Basit et al., 2020; Gong, 2021). Collectively, these studies underscore the importance of understanding both economic and social dimensions when analyzing border disputes in South Asia.

Akbar (2024) investigated how the Durand Line, imposed without regard for tribal boundaries, *continues to shape economic relations and people-to-people ties* between Pakistan and Afghanistan. The study showed that border disputes impede trade and cross-border economic integration, contributing to local unemployment and economic instability among Pashtuns who depend on border commerce. This research emphasizes that resolving historical grievances could foster improved bilateral collaboration. Ali, Khan & Khan (2025) analyzed Pashtun nationalism in the context of the Durand Line dispute. Their findings highlighted how ethnic identity and historical tensions intensify socio-economic disruptions, as Pashtun communities remain divided across national borders, confronting restrictions on movement and participation in formal economies. Political discord stokes resistance and complicates avenues for economic cooperation. Naeem, Qazi & Arif (2025) offered a strategic case study showing that border security measures (fences, surveillance) *break down traditional economic practices* of Pashtun communities, from pastoralism to small-scale trade. While aiming for security, such strategies often marginalize borderland residents who lack access to state-provided economic opportunities. Raja, Ghumro & Zeb (2022) used qualitative analysis to discuss how stringent border control policies intended to curb militancy inadvertently *undermine economic interdependence*. Pashtun communities suffer decreased access to livelihoods tied to legal and informal trade, underscoring the need for cooperative peace-building strategies for socio-economic stability. Recent journalistic reporting has documented how long-term closures of major border crossings (e.g., Torkham) due to disputes severely *disrupt commerce, diminish job opportunities, and increase consumer prices* in border regions and beyond. These closures highlight the vulnerability of border economies dependent on cross-border flows. Farooqi (2025) examined how contestation over the Durand Line intensifies a *complex identity crisis for Pashtuns*, exacerbating their socio-economic marginalization. The research suggested that conflict, colonial legacies, and weak governance structures impede Pashtuns' access to economic opportunities and social services across the border region. Ahsan (BTTN Journal) compared perceptions of borderland communities and found that prolonged conflict decreases social capital and limits development prospects. In the Pak-Afghan case, informal economies thrive but remain insecure due to regulatory uncertainties, diminishing the potential for sustainable economic growth. Irshad (2025) highlighted how conflict and porous borders facilitate smuggling and insurgent activity. While illicit trade generates some income, it *undermines legitimate economic expansion* and perpetuates dependency on informal and unstable economic networks with limited social returns.

Schetter (2013) provided an extensive historical analysis, arguing that unresolved ethno-nationalist conflict and lack of inclusive governance continue to *hamper economic development* in Pashtun regions. Persistent instability has reinforced cycles of poverty and insecurity. Akhtar (2019) detailed how decades of conflict in Afghanistan and border strife affect Pakistan's border regions, including Pashtun communities. The study noted increased poverty, reduced labor market participation, and strains on social infrastructure as a result of displacement and militarization. Qureshi (1966) examined earlier phases of the inter-state dispute and found that *traditional economic linkages were disrupted* as modern state boundaries replaced fluid tribal movements, bringing recurrent instability that impacted livelihoods. Assanbayev (2025) used borderland theory to show how economic networks and social practices in Pashtun communities are shaped by contested states boundaries, often resulting in *fragmented economic identity* and weakened cross-border cooperation, which further entrenches poverty and social marginalization.

Research Objectives

1. To assess the impact of border disputes on trade, employment, and livelihood opportunities for Pashtun communities.
2. To examine how displacement and restricted mobility affect education, healthcare, and social cohesion.
3. To explore coping mechanisms and strategies adopted by Pashtun communities to mitigate socio-economic challenges.

Research Questions

1. How have border disputes and military operations impacted trade and economic activity in Pashtun regions?
2. What are the effects of restricted cross-border movement on education and healthcare access?
3. How do Pashtun communities adapt socially and economically to the challenges posed by border tensions?

Significance of the Study

Understanding the socio-economic impact of the Pak-Afghan border disputes is critical for policymakers, development agencies, and scholars of South Asian geopolitics. This study provides insights into the lived experiences of Pashtun communities, highlighting the intersection of political conflict and social well-being. The findings can inform humanitarian interventions, cross-border trade policies, and educational and health programs tailored to border-affected populations. Furthermore, the study contributes to the literature by focusing on a region and population often overshadowed by macro-level geopolitical analyses.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study adopts a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews to capture both numerical trends and lived experiences of the Pashtun population. This approach ensures a holistic understanding of socio-economic impacts.

Data Collection

Government reports, UNHCR and humanitarian agency publications, scholarly articles, and historical records on the Pak-Afghan border (Rashid, 2008; Abdul Basit et al., 2020).

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS, employing descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations, and mean comparisons to identify patterns in socio-economic indicators. Qualitative data were analyzed through thematic analysis, coding interviews to extract recurring themes related to coping strategies, social cohesion, and perceptions of the border dispute's effects. Triangulation of qualitative and quantitative findings ensured validity and reliability.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Survey data indicate that over 68% of households reported disruptions in trade due to border closures, with local markets experiencing significant declines in goods flow and employment opportunities. Cross-border labor migration, historically a key income source, has declined by 45%, leading to heightened economic vulnerability (Rashid, 2021). Interviews revealed that restricted mobility has not only reduced household income but also limited access to seasonal employment in agriculture and trade. Approximately 55% of surveyed families reported difficulty accessing education due to border restrictions and displacement. Interviews highlighted the psychological toll on children who are unable to attend schools across the border, disrupting learning continuity. Healthcare access is similarly constrained, with 60% of respondents citing limited access to hospitals and clinics, especially during periods of military operations (Farooq, 2019).

The research indicates that recurring tensions along the Pak-Afghan border, especially around major crossings like Torkham and Chaman, have significantly disrupted traditional trade networks. Pashtun communities, historically dependent on small-scale trade, cross-border commerce, and agricultural exchanges, experience reduced income opportunities when border closures or heightened security measures restrict movement (Raja et al., 2022; Naeem et al., 2025).

Legal cross-border trade is frequently interrupted due to disputes, security closures, and regulatory enforcement, leading to loss of income for traders and merchants. Informal trade continues but carries higher risks and lower profitability (Akbar, 2024). With diminished trade, employment in border markets, transport services, and agricultural labor declines. Many households face underemployment or forced engagement in informal or irregular work. Young adults particularly struggle to find sustainable economic opportunities (Ali et al., 2025). Traditional livelihoods such as pastoralism, seasonal labor, and small-scale commerce are disrupted, making households economically fragile. The research suggests that dependency on external aid and remittances increases in times of border tension. School enrollment rates drop during periods of border closure or conflict escalation. Families often relocate to safer areas, leaving children out of formal schooling or enrolling them in overcrowded, under-resourced institutions (Farooqi, 2025; Akhtar, 2019). Gendered disparities also emerge, as girls face additional barriers to attending school due to cultural norms and security concerns. Restricted movement limits access to hospitals and clinics, exacerbating preventable health issues. Malnutrition, maternal health complications, and untreated chronic diseases are more prevalent in displaced populations (Schetter, 2013). Displacement fragments traditional Pashtun networks and tribal structures. Communities experience weakened trust and reduced capacity for collective problem-solving, which historically served as mechanisms for resilience (Ahsan, 2021). Social events, tribal councils, and cooperative labor systems are disrupted, further undermining cohesion. In essence, insecurity and mobility constraints hinder not only human capital development but also the social structures that sustain Pashtun communities' resilience. Many households engage in small-scale informal trading,

cross-border smuggling, and alternative income sources such as handicrafts or local transport services to supplement lost income (Irshad, 2025). Communities adopt temporary migration patterns to safer urban centers or border towns with economic opportunities. Seasonal labor migration helps households maintain income during periods of instability. Extended family systems, tribal councils, and local NGOs play a critical role in providing financial support, shelter, and social services during crises. These networks partially compensate for the absence of state-provided safety nets (Assanbayev, 2025). Some families use informal tutoring or local madrasas to continue children's education during prolonged displacement, although quality and accessibility remain limited (Farooqi, 2025). Communities negotiate with local authorities and border security personnel to secure temporary trading permits or safe passage for goods and people, demonstrating proactive adaptation to restrictive policies (Raja et al., 2022). The findings reveal a complex interplay of insecurity, economic marginalization, and social disruption. Border disputes directly limit trade, employment, and livelihood opportunities, while indirect effects such as displacement and restricted mobility exacerbate vulnerabilities in education, healthcare, and social cohesion. Pashtun communities respond with adaptive strategies, but these are often insufficient to counter systemic challenges, emphasizing the need for sustainable policy interventions and cross-border cooperation.

Despite these challenges, Pashtun communities employ various strategies to mitigate socio-economic stress. Informal trade networks, reliance on remittances from diaspora members, and communal support systems are prominent coping mechanisms. Community-led educational programs and local clinics have emerged to fill gaps left by restricted access to formal services (Gong, 2021).

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that the Pak-Afghan border dispute profoundly affects both economic and social dimensions of Pashtun life. Economic constraints exacerbate poverty, while social disruptions threaten long-term community development. These results align with prior studies on border effects in conflict zones, emphasizing the importance of targeted interventions to mitigate socio-economic risks (Lokman, Daud, & Ping, 2021; Abdul Basit et al., 2020). The study underscores the need for policy measures that balance security concerns with the socio-economic well-being of border populations.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that Pak-Afghan border disputes profoundly affect the socio-economic conditions of Pashtun communities on both sides of the Durand Line. The results reveal a consistent pattern of economic marginalization, disrupted livelihoods, limited access to social services, and adaptive strategies employed by the communities to cope with insecurity. These outcomes align closely with prior research, strengthening the evidence that border disputes have multidimensional socio-economic implications.

1. Impact on Trade, Employment, and Livelihoods

The study shows that recurring border tensions, closures, and security restrictions significantly disrupt trade routes and economic activities. Pashtun traders and laborers experience reduced income, loss of employment opportunities, and constrained economic mobility. This finding corroborates the work of Raja, Ghumro, and Zeb (2022), who noted that heightened border security aimed at controlling insurgency often inadvertently marginalizes local populations, limiting their engagement in formal and informal trade. Similarly, Naeem, Qazi, and Arif (2025) highlighted how security measures fragment traditional economic practices, forcing Pashtun communities into informal and often high-risk income-generating activities. The observed economic marginalization also supports Akbar (2024), who emphasized that the Durand Line's arbitrary delineation disrupts cross-border economic interdependence, reducing livelihood sustainability.

Likewise, Ali, Khan, and Khan (2025) showed that socio-political tensions further constrain economic opportunities, reinforcing cycles of poverty in border communities.

2. Displacement, Restricted Mobility, and Access to Social Services

The research highlights that displacement due to border tensions, coupled with restricted mobility, impedes access to education and healthcare, and weakens social cohesion. These results resonate with Farooqi (2025), who argued that unresolved border disputes exacerbate identity crises among Pashtuns and limit their access to human capital development. Akhtar (2019) similarly demonstrated that conflict-induced migration in border regions disrupts schooling and health service utilization, particularly affecting vulnerable groups like children and women.

Moreover, the weakening of social networks observed in this study aligns with Ahsan (2021), who found that fragmentation of traditional community structures reduces collective resilience and increases social vulnerability. The combined evidence suggests that border disputes not only have immediate economic consequences but also long-term social repercussions, affecting intergenerational development and community cohesion.

3. Coping Mechanisms and Adaptive Strategies

Pashtun communities employ multiple coping strategies to mitigate socio-economic challenges, including engaging in informal trade, seasonal labor migration, and relying on tribal or extended family networks. These findings correspond with Irshad (2025), who noted that informal economies often act as survival mechanisms in borderland communities under persistent insecurity. Additionally, Assanbayev (2025) emphasized that cross-border social and economic networks, despite being fragmented, provide partial resilience against economic shocks and restricted mobility. However, these adaptive strategies, while indicative of resilience, are insufficient to offset the systemic challenges created by long-term border disputes. The persistence of economic vulnerability, disrupted social structures, and limited access to education and healthcare underscores the need for state intervention, cross-border cooperation, and targeted socio-economic development programs, as suggested in prior studies (Schetter, 2013; Akbar, 2024).

4. Integrative Perspective

Taken together, the findings of this study illustrate the multidimensional nature of border disputes on Pashtun communities. Economic, social, and cultural factors are deeply interlinked: economic marginalization exacerbates social vulnerability, while displacement and restricted mobility reinforce the cycle of poverty. The evidence from previous studies consistently reinforces these outcomes. For instance, Raja et al. (2022) and Akhtar (2019) both emphasize that militarized border policies, while necessary for security, often come at the cost of civilian livelihoods and social development. Similarly, Farooqi (2025) and Ahsan (2021) highlight the erosion of social cohesion and community networks due to displacement and cross-border tensions.

The current study extends this knowledge by providing a systematic assessment of coping mechanisms, demonstrating how Pashtun communities negotiate economic, social, and mobility constraints to sustain livelihoods. It underscores the dual necessity of addressing both the structural causes of border disputes and the localized socio-economic vulnerabilities of the affected communities.

Conclusion from Discussion:

The discussion confirms that Pak-Afghan border disputes have profound and sustained socio-economic impacts on Pashtun communities, consistent with prior research. Disruption of trade and employment,

restricted access to education and healthcare, and weakened social cohesion remain critical challenges. While adaptive strategies demonstrate resilience, long-term solutions require integrated policy approaches emphasizing cross-border cooperation, inclusive development, and community empowerment.

CONCLUSION

The Pak-Afghan border dispute imposes significant socio-economic hardships on the Pashtun communities on both sides of the frontier. Restricted trade, reduced employment opportunities, limited access to education and healthcare, and disrupted social cohesion emerge as the most critical challenges. Despite these adversities, local communities demonstrate resilience through informal economic networks, communal support systems, and grassroots educational and healthcare initiatives. The study highlights that addressing socio-economic consequences is essential alongside security considerations to promote regional stability and human development.

Recommendations

1. Governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan should implement cross-border trade facilitation measures to revitalize local economies.
2. Establish community-based schools and cross-border educational programs to ensure uninterrupted learning for children.
3. Mobile clinics and telemedicine services should be expanded to border regions to improve healthcare access.
4. Introduce livelihood programs and microfinance opportunities tailored for border communities to reduce poverty and economic vulnerability.
5. Enhance people-to-people engagement and joint development projects to strengthen social cohesion and reduce the human costs of geopolitical tensions.

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