

In June, Afghanistan began accusing Pakistan of violating Afghan territory by crossing the infamous Durand Line, which led ultimately to anti-Pakistani riots in Kabul and other Afghan cities. During one of these demonstrations, the Embassy of Pakistan in Kabul was ransacked by a mob, causing the closure of the mission (see "RFE/RL Afghanistan Report," 17 and 24 July 2003). While both governments have attempted diplomatically to quell the resulting tension since the riots, low-intensity armed skirmishes have continued in the disputed area along the Durand Line, bringing the two neighbors close to an outright military conflict (see news section below). While Islamabad has maintained throughout the minicrisis that its forces were inside its own territory, Kabul insists that Pakistani forces did, in fact, intrude anywhere from 60 meters to 40 kilometers inside Afghanistan.

Fortunately, the situation was brought under control with the formation of a tripartite commission, consisting of representatives from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the United States. During a meeting of this tripartite commission in Islamabad in July, it was agreed that Afghanistan and Pakistan would use the Ground Positioning System (GPS), with U.S. help, to determine if the border had indeed been violated and possibly to prevent future incidents along the Durand Line. However, an unidentified Pakistani official attending the meeting is reported to have said that even if the sides "use the GPS coordinates," they would "have yet to agree on which map to use as a benchmark." According to the Pakistani official, Afghanistan based its claims of Pakistani intrusions on Soviet military maps, while Pakistan was using maps drawn by the British when the territory of today's Pakistan was still part of the empire in India. The Pakistani official explained: "Afghanistan being a successor to the state of Amir Abdul Rahman, and we being successors to the British Empire, are signatory to the November 1893 Durand Line Treaty. The Durand Line was drawn by the British and we are using the same British maps."

Sources close to the tripartite commission have indicated that upon further review, Pakistan has moved back some of its newly positioned border posts. Moreover, the cause of the Afghan-Pakistani row may have less to do with maps than with elements that are not pleased with the current realities in Afghanistan. One issue that must be addressed by both Kabul and Islamabad, with international supervision, is the exact coordinates of the "Durand Line." By accomplishing this and settling the border once and for all, Afghanistan and Pakistan can alleviate the provocations by the various elements on either side of the border.

What Is The Durand Line?

The boundary between Afghanistan and Pakistan takes its name from Sir Henry Mortimer Durand, foreign secretary of British India, who concluded an agreement with Amir Abdul Rahman Khan (ruled 1880-1901) of Afghanistan on 12 November 1893. This agreement formally adjusted the "the eastern and southern frontier of His Highness's dominions, from Wakhan [corridor] to the Persian border."

The history of the Durand Line goes back to the Treaty of Gandumak, signed in May 1879 between British Major Louis Cavagnari and the Afghan Amir Mohammad Ya'qub Khan during the Second Anglo-Afghan War of 1879-80. According to provisions of the Gandumak Agreement, the British were to maintain a military and diplomatic presence in Afghanistan and control its foreign policy. Also, Britain was granted jurisdictional control of the three strategically significant frontier districts of Kurram, Sibi, and Pishin. However, when the Gandumak plan failed to achieve peace, the British opted to leave Afghanistan, but to ensure that it remained a buffer state between their own Indian empire and the Russian empire in Central Asia.

When Abdul Rahman became the amir, Afghanistan's boundaries were not demarcated. The British sought at that time to keep the Russians out of and the amir inside a geographically defined Afghanistan.

According to Article 4 of the Durand Agreement, the "frontier line will hereafter be laid down in detail and demarcated, wherever this may be practicable and desirable, by Joint British and Afghan Commissioners, whose object will be to arrive by mutual understanding at a boundary which shall adhere with the greatest possible exactness" to the agreed map, and "have due regard to the existing local rights of villages adjoining the frontier." While the Durand Line set the limits of the territories of Afghanistan and British India on paper, the entire border was not actually demarcated at that time.