

EVALUATING PAKISTAN'S BORDER MANAGEMENT: KEY
CHALLENGES AND POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

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June, 2025

ABSTRACT

This study examines Pakistan's border management along its borders with India, Afghanistan, and Iran, excluding its border with China, which is generally safe and free from contention. It is being influenced by a multitude of factors entailing not just geopolitical conflicts but also militants' infiltration, smuggling, illegal trade, institutional deficiencies, and infrastructural challenges. It is hypothesised that to navigate these complexities, Pakistan needs a multi-prong approach entailing strategic diplomacy, technological modernisation, economic engagement and narrative transformation. Sustainable management necessitates inclusive policies that consider local circumstances, cross-border human connections, and cultural aspects. Drawing on qualitative data, including expert interviews and thematic analysis, this research identifies challenges that occur at borders due to gaps in policy, infrastructure, and coordination. Thereby, the paper proposes a comprehensive framework to address the challenges to ensure national security and regional stability by pursuing better diplomatic relations with adjacent states.

Keywords: *Border Management, National Security, Pakistan-India Border, Pakistan-Afghanistan Border, Pakistan-Iran Border, Militant Infiltration, Smuggling, Regional Stability*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Pakistan's geography is of strategic significance but entails volatile frontiers. It shares a total land border of about 6,774 km with four countries, India, Afghanistan, Iran, and China. Each of these borders, less border with China, presents distinct challenges shaped by historical disputes, regional conflicts, and differing governance issues. This paper evaluates Pakistan's border management across major frontiers, including India, Afghanistan and Iran, focusing on border insecurity involving militant infiltration, drone incursions, smuggling and illegal trade, money laundering, human trafficking, internal inefficiencies and infrastructural gaps. Fundamentally, it evaluates key challenges of border management in Pakistan and offers policy recommendations to strengthen its effectiveness in managing the borders to address security, diplomatic, and regional stability concerns.

1.1. Overview of the Border Management in Pakistan

Border Management along the India-Pakistan frontier is predominantly shaped by deep-rooted distrust and a history of militarised engagement. Pakistan faces persistent security threats, such as cross-border infiltration, smuggling, and firing incidents.¹ Though both countries share geography and cultural affinity, they have failed to translate it into collaborative border governance.² One of the primary factors is

¹ Pushpita Das, *Issues in the Management of the India–Pakistan International Border* (New Delhi: Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, 2014), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/271929780_Issues_in_the_Management_of_the_India-Pakistan_International_Border#:~:text=As%20the%20India%E2%80%93Pakistan%20border,effective%20management%20of%20the%20border.

² Dhananjay Tripathi and Hannah Macpherson, *So Similar Yet So Distant: India–Pakistan Relations and the Role of the Border* (South Asia Centre, London School of Economics, 2021), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14662043.2021.1997190>

securitised nationalism,³ which has majorly contributed to the dismal relations between them.

Additionally, the Pakistan-Afghanistan border is a volatile and complex border which is rooted in historical conflict, tribal autonomy and cross-border insurgency. Fundamentally, the Durand Line remains a concern in Pak-Afghan relations, often manipulated by illegal immigrants, insurgent groups and nationalist elements.⁴ Moreover, local tribal dynamics and the transnational nature of militant networks complicate traditional security responses⁵ such as fencing that disrupts traditional kinship and trade networks of a culturally unified population.⁶

Although less extensively studied, the Pakistan-Iran border reveals a unique set of management challenges rooted in marginalisation, smuggling, and ethnic dynamics. This boundary has become victim of illicit activities including informal trade⁷, money laundering⁸ and human trafficking⁹. Existing literature identifies poor infrastructure, inadequate governance, and limited state presence as contributing factors to

³ Dhananjay Tripathi and Hannah Macpherson, *So Similar Yet So Distant: India–Pakistan Relations and the Role of the Border* (South Asia Centre, London School of Economics, 2021), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14662043.2021.1997190>

⁴ Amina Khan, *Pak-Afghan Border: A Case Study of Border Management* (Islamabad: Institute of Strategic Studies, 2017), https://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/2-SS_Amina_Khan_No-3_2017.pdf

⁵ Lacin Idil Oztig, "Pakistan's Border Policies and Security Dynamics along the Pakistan–Afghanistan Border," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 55, no. 4 (2020): 489–504, <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781003219545-5/pakistan-border-policies-security-dynamics-along-pakistan%E2%80%93afghanistan-border-lacin-idil-oztig>

⁶ Safder Nisar and Syeda Sadaf Raza, "Borders Divide: Fencing the Pakistan-Afghanistan Border and the Question of Political Identity of Mohmand Tribe," *Journal of Political Studies* 29, no. 1 (2022): 239–252, http://pu.edu.pk/images/journal/pols/pdf_files/17_v29_1_22.pdf.

⁷ Kiyya Baloch and Niaz Lashari, "With Few Job Options, Balochistan Residents Turn to Smuggling," *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, February 15, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/fuel-smuggling-pakistan-iran-balochistan/31097489.html>.

⁸ Arab News, "Pakistan Probe Links Iranian Supreme Leader's Representative to Money Laundering," *Arab News*, April 10, 2022, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2059986/world>.

⁹ "Human Trafficking: The Dark Side of Pakistan's Migration Rush - Google Search," n.d., https://www.google.com/search?q=Human+trafficking%3A+The+dark+side+of+Pakistan%27s+migrati on+rush&rlz=1C1ONGR_deDE1000DE1000&oq=Human+trafficking%3A+The+dark+side+of+Pakista n%27s+migration+rush&gs_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUyBggAEEUYOdIBCDExNTVqMGo3qAIAAsAIA&source id=chrome&ie=UTF-8.

persistent insecurity. While both countries have expressed mutual interest in improving border security, occasionally conducting joint operations or proposing fencing, the lack of a sustained bilateral framework limits progress.

Considering international best practices in border management, it is often held that these are centred on integrated, secure and coordinated approaches that balance sovereignty, security and facilitation. According to the UN's Global Compact for Migration, Objective 11 maintains that “*Manage borders in an integrated, secure and coordinated manner...promoting bilateral and regional cooperation...facilitating safe and regular cross-border movements...while preventing irregular migration.*”¹⁰ This entails whole-of-government framework, pre-screening of arrivals, pre-reporting by carriers, and information and communications technology (ICT) tools ensuring due process, privacy and non-discrimination. Best practices also emphasise inter-agency and international collaboration through shared legal frameworks, procedures, training, information exchange and equipment¹¹. Moreover, risk-based approaches, using advanced passenger information, passenger name records, biometrics, and timely intelligence along with the employment of “human-in-the-loop” safeguards, and transparent accountability are also critical aspects to manage borders.¹² Together, these interconnected strategies reflect recognised international standards for modern border governance and it becomes imperative to study how Pakistan can manage its borders given its unique challenges at the frontiers.

¹⁰ “GCM Objective 11 - Manage Borders,” United Nations Network on Migration, February 25, 2025, <https://migrationnetwork.un.org/taxonomy/term/289>.

¹¹ Budapest Process, “Integrated Border Management - Budapest Process,” November 7, 2022, <https://www.budapestprocess.org/integrated-border-management/>.

¹² European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS), *Comparative Study on the EU Health Policy* (Brussels: European Parliament, September 2021), 15, accessed July 12, 2025, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2021/690706/EPRS_IDA\(2021\)690706_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2021/690706/EPRS_IDA(2021)690706_EN.pdf).

Despite the extensive body of studies on border management, there exists a significant gap in the literature. It has not provided an integrated and comprehensive analysis of Pakistan's border management and the discrete challenges that exist along each frontier simultaneously. Filling this gap is essential in building a comprehensive national strategy that accounts for the entire gamut of Pakistan's geopolitical and security concerns. Thereby, it is posited that a combination of strategic diplomacy, technological modernisation, and inter-agency coordination can improve border governance. Sustainable management also requires inclusive policies that account for ground realities, cross-border human interactions, and psychological and cultural dimensions.

1.2. Research Methodology and Structure of the study

This study employs a qualitative approach that integrates thematic analysis and semi-structured interviews with experts, an ambassador, an academic and an FIA official as primary sources to evaluate Pakistan's border management and contemporary dynamics thereof. These interviews provide first-hand insights into the border management of Pakistan. A comprehensive review of books, academic journals, online articles, and reports provides secondary data to contextualise Pakistan's border management, its challenges and the way forward.

This paper is structured into five sections. The first section introduces the background, literature review, and methodology. The second section explores Pakistan's border management and the third section focuses on potential challenges that Pakistan is facing in managing its borders, specifically with India, Afghanistan and Iran. The fourth section presents recommendations based on the findings, offering

insights in this realm. Finally, the fifth section concludes the paper by summarising the key takeaways and suggesting future research directions.

2. BORDER MANAGEMENT IN PAKISTAN



Figure 1 Pakistan's Geographical Boundaries with Adjacent States¹³

Figure 1 is the political map of Pakistan that shows its international borders with India, Afghanistan, Iran, and China. It visually emphasises Pakistan's strategic location. A detailed explanation of Pakistan's borders is given below:

¹³ Nisar Ali Khan, Camillo Nuti, and Giorgio Monti, "Pakistan's Heritage Management," *ResearchGate*, April 19, 2022, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/360702376_Pakistanas_Heritage_Management?tp=eyJjb250ZXh0ljp7ImZpcnN0UGFnZSI6Il9kaXJlY3QiLCJwYWdlIjoX2RpcmVjdCJ9fQ.

2.1. Pakistan-India Border

3.1.1. Overview of the Border



Figure 2 Pakistan-India Border¹⁴

Figure 2 highlights the border region between eastern Pakistan and western India, focusing on surrounding areas of the Pakistan-India border. It indicates two important locations, the Kartarpur corridor and the Attari-Wagha Border.

The Pakistan-India border, also known as the International Border, is a 3,323-kilometre-long boundary that separates India and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. It runs from the Line of Control (LOC) in the north through Jammu and Kashmir to the Zero Point in the south, connecting Gujarat of India with Sindh in Pakistan. This boundary comprises several segments: the internationally recognised border, the

¹⁴ Created by the Author

working boundary, the Line of Control (LoC) in the disputed Jammu and Kashmir region, and the Actual Ground Position Line (AGPL) in the Siachen Glacier area.¹⁵

The boundary issues between Pakistan and India date back to the 1947 partition of the subcontinent, when the illegal accession of Jammu & Kashmir sparked deep animosity between the two states. Siachen is an issue related to Kashmir¹⁶, followed by the working boundary. The Sir Creek is a disputed marshy land at the mouth of the Indus River,¹⁷ and its dispute has origins in a pre-partition boundary drawn in 1914 by the Bombay Government between Sindh and Kutch. Pakistan upholds the eastern bank demarcation from that map, while India insists on mid-channel boundaries, prolonging the dispute.¹⁸

3.1.2. Border Crossings and Transit Points

Talking about the crossings, the Wagah-Attari crossing, as shown in the following figure 3, is located near Lahore and Amritsar. It is the most prominent transit point, renowned for its daily flag-lowering ceremony¹⁹ conducted by the Pakistan Rangers and India's Border Security Force, symbolising both rivalry and cooperation.

¹⁵ Zahoor Ahmad Rather and Deepika Gupta, "Ceasefire Violation – Pakistan's Transgression on the Line of Control, A Situation Growing More Serious," *International Research Journal of Social Sciences* 3, no. 1 (January 2014): 38–44, accessed via International Science Congress Association, <https://www.isca.me/IJSS/Archive/v3/i1/9.ISCA-IRJSS-2013-211.pdf>.

¹⁶ Babar Ayaz, *What's Wrong with Pakistan?* (New Delhi: Hay House Publishers (India), 2013), 364.

¹⁷ Babar Ayaz, *What's Wrong with Pakistan?* (New Delhi: Hay House Publishers (India), 2013), 364.

¹⁸ Our Correspondents, "Sir Creek: A Not so Complicated Issue," *The News International*, June 30, 2015, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/48839-sir-creek-a-not-so-complicated-issue?>

¹⁹ "Unique Flag-Lowering Ceremony | Tourism, Archaeology and Museums Department," n.d., <https://tourism.punjab.gov.pk/flag-lowering-ceremony>.

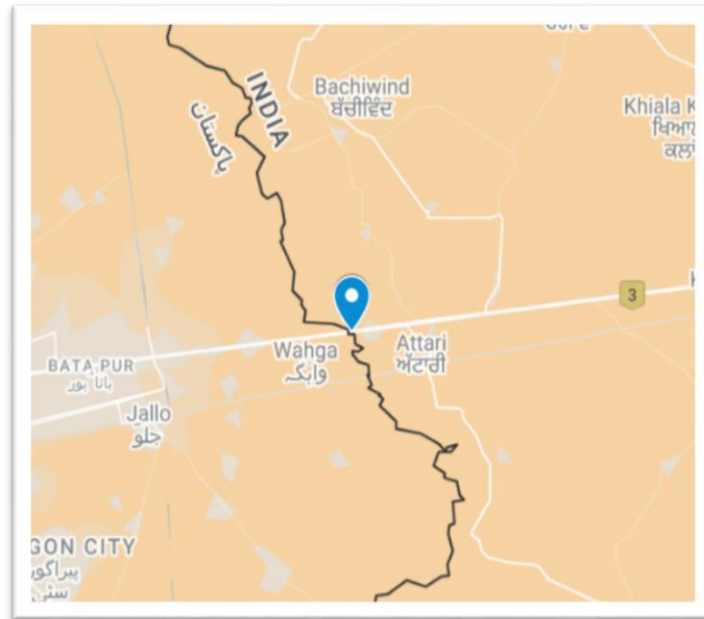


Figure 3 Attari - Wagah Border

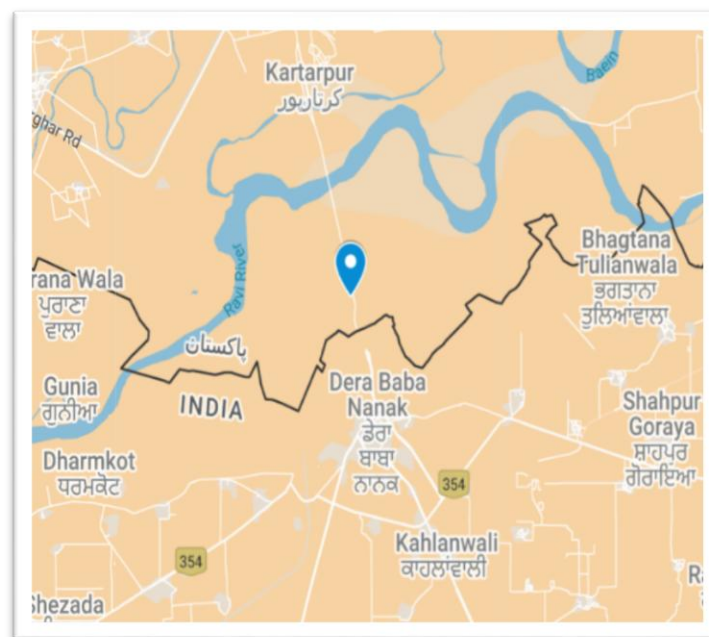


Figure 4 Kartarpur Corridor

Another significant passage is the Kartarpur Corridor, as shown in Figure 4. It was inaugurated in 2019, allowing Indian Sikh pilgrims visa-free access to the

Gurdwara Darbar Sahib in Pakistan.²⁰ However, the people-to-people movement has temporarily been suspended following Operation Sindhur²¹. Besides, one land border Munabao-Khokhrapar²² crossing and two railway routes, involving Thar Express in Sindh and Samjauta Express in Attari had previously functioned. Since 2009, these routes have been inactive due to political tensions and security concerns.²³ While efforts like the Wagha ceremony and the Kartarpur Corridor aim to foster goodwill, underlying tensions persist, underscoring the delicate balance of diplomacy and security in the region.

3.1.3 Emerging Dynamics and Security Calculations

When it comes to preventing miscalculation and managing tensions along the border, Pakistan and India have a complex equation since the only form of contact between the two countries is through weekly telephone calls between the Directors General of Military Operations (DGMOs), who communicate on routine matters. However, there is no real interaction across the border with India as of now.²⁴

Shifting now to recent escalations, the problem has become even more intricate following the post-Pahalgam military confrontation of May 2025. In April 2025, a terrorist attack in Pahalgam, Indian-administered Kashmir, **resulted in the 26 deaths of civilians**. India attributed the attack to Pakistan-based groups and launched "Operation Sindhur,"²⁵ conducting missile strikes on alleged militant camps in Pakistan

²⁰ Al Jazeera, "India-Pakistan Corridor Set to Open for Sikh Pilgrims," *Al Jazeera*, November 8, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/11/8/india-pakistan-corridor-set-to-open-for-sikh-pilgrims>.

²¹ "Conflict Between India and Pakistan | Global Conflict Tracker," Global Conflict Tracker, n.d., <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-between-india-and-pakistan>.

²² DAWN, "Explainer: Border Crossings Between India and Pakistan," *DAWN*, April 24, 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1906327>.

²³ Interview with FIA official, June 7, 2025.

²⁴ Interview with Ambassador Aizaz Ahmed Chaudary, June 7, 2025.

²⁵ "Conflict Between India and Pakistan | Global Conflict Tracker," Global Conflict Tracker, n.d., <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-between-india-and-pakistan>.

and Pakistan-administered Kashmir. Pakistan condemned the strikes, leading to a four-day military escalation involving cross-border shelling and drone incursions. The conflict caused civilian casualties and infrastructure damage on both sides.²⁶ Although a ceasefire has been brokered, tensions remain high. At present, the placement of Pakistani troops along the international border, the working boundary, and the Line of Control has successfully kept Indian forces at bay.²⁷ The border is currently being managed reasonably well, and the status quo in border management between India and Pakistan is expected to continue in the foreseeable future.²⁸

2.2. Pakistan-Afghanistan Border

2.2.1. Overview of the Border



²⁶ “Conflict Between India and Pakistan | Global Conflict Tracker,” Global Conflict Tracker, n.d., <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-between-india-and-pakistan>.

²⁷ Interview with Ambassador Aizaz Ahmed Chaudary, June 7, 2025.

²⁸ Interview with Dr Shahid Afridi, Expert on Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations, June 4, 2025.

Figure 5 Pakistan-Afghanistan Border²⁹

Figure 3 displays Pakistan's western border with Afghanistan, highlighting key border crossings, Torkham and Chaman. It visually represents the critical frontier impacted by cross-border movement, security threats, and regional interdependence.

The Pakistan-Afghanistan border is a 2,640 km international boundary separating the two countries in South Asia.³⁰ It was established in 1893 between British India and the Emirate of Afghanistan and traverses challenging terrains, including the Hindu Kush mountains and arid deserts. The border was named the Durand Line, after Sir Henry Mortimer Durand, who brokered the agreement with the Afghan emir.³¹

While recognised internationally, the border is controversial in Afghanistan, particularly among Pashtun communities as the Durand Line arbitrarily bisected Pashtun tribal territories under the 1893 agreement, sowing deep resentment as it divided communities sharing kinship, language, and culture, an act still perceived as colonial injustice.³² However, to enhance security and manage cross-border movement, Pakistan initiated the construction of a border fence in 2017, which, by April 2023, was reported to be 98 percent complete.³³ This barrier comprises steel fencing, surveillance systems, and numerous border posts, aiming to curb illegal crossings and infiltration. Nevertheless, these efforts to erect fences and border posts

²⁹ Created by the Author

³⁰ Khadija Almus Khanum, *Pak-Afghan Border: An International Law Perspective*, IPRI Policy Brief, December 2024, 1–2, Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies (IPRI), <https://ipripak.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/1.-PakAfghan-International-Border-Policy-Brief-2.pdf>.

³¹ Raikar and Sanat Pai, "Durand Line | Geography, History, Geopolitics, & Facts," Encyclopedia Britannica, June 6, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Durand-Line>.

³² "The Durand Line: A British Legacy Plaguing Afghan-Pakistani Relations," Middle East Institute, n.d., <https://www.mei.edu/publications/durand-line-british-legacy-plaguing-afghan-pakistani-relations?>

³³ Samaa Web Desk, "Pakistan's Border Security Advances with 98% Fencing Completion," *Samaa TV*, December 28, 2024, accessed July 13, 2025, <https://samaa.tv/2087326336-pakistan-s-border-security-advances-with-98-fencing-completion>.

along the Durand Line have met consistent resistance from Pashtun tribes and successive Afghan governments, who view such moves as attempts to cement a contested and illegitimate frontier.³⁴

2.2.2. Official Border Crossings and Movement

There are eight official border crossings between the two nations³⁵, with Torkham and Chaman being the most prominent, facilitating significant trade and transit. Despite these measures, the border remains a point of contention, leading to periodic tensions and skirmishes. Also, the prevailing conditions in Afghanistan have long facilitated the operations of illicit trade networks, including those involved in smuggling, drug trafficking, and arms proliferation.³⁶

However, to tackle this, physical measures are being taken, which are supported by advanced monitoring systems at major crossings, including biometric identification, surveillance cameras, infrared sensors, and drone-assisted patrols.³⁷ An extensive network of defence check-posts and regular intelligence-led inspections has resulted in a notable reduction in unauthorised crossings and militant infiltration along key transit points.³⁸

³⁴ "The Durand Line: A British Legacy Plaguing Afghan-Pakistani Relations," Middle East Institute, n.d., <https://www.mei.edu/publications/durand-line-british-legacy-plaguing-afghan-pakistani-relations?>

³⁵ Arooj Naveed, "Good Fences, Good Neighbors: Border Management Between Pakistan and Afghanistan," South Asian Voices, August 16, 2017, <https://southasianvoices.org/good-fences-good-neighbors/>.

³⁶ Babar Ayaz, *What's Wrong with Pakistan?* (New Delhi: Hay House Publishers (India), 2013), 364.

³⁷ Aimal Khan, "The Pak-Afghan Border Fence Is a Step in the Right Direction," *Al Jazeera*, February 25, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/2/25/the-pak-afghan-border-fence-is-a-step-in-the-right-direction>.

³⁸ Muhammad Javed and Muhammad Munir, "Pak-Afghan Border and Regional Stability: A Perspective of Pakistan," *NUST Journal of International Peace and Stability* 3, no. 2 (2020): 21–34, <https://njips.nust.edu.pk/index.php/njips/article/download/151/125/427>.

2.2.3. Strategic Importance of Border Management

Pakistan's border management with Afghanistan is important from several perspectives. One is that Pakistan has to ensure that terrorists do not infiltrate, so it is imperative to have effective border management. Moreover, Pakistan has grappled with illegal immigration, with millions of undocumented foreigners, including Afghans, living in the country. More than 3.5 million³⁹ Afghans have been living in Pakistan, according to the UN's refugee agency, including around 700,000 people who came after the Taliban takeover in 2021. However, Pakistan launched a repatriation drive in October 2023. According to UN report, by 26 April 2025, some 986,268 Afghans had repatriated, 87 percent undocumented, 9 percent holding Proof of Registration (PoR) cards, and 4 percent Afghan Citizen Card (ACC) holders.⁴⁰

The UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) has made several observations on this policy and expressed its concerns. However, the approach taken was considered coercive, but it has achieved results from a security standpoint.⁴¹ Besides, after the Taliban's return and renewed terrorism threats, stricter enforcement became necessary. Currently, only travellers with valid passports and Pakistani visas are accepted⁴² and this move has yielded fruitful results.

³⁹ BBC News, "Pakistan Border Fence Causes Controversy," *BBC News*, April 19, 2025, accessed July 12, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c74z19pl7wgo>.

⁴⁰ "Integrated Response Plan for Afghan Returnees From Pakistan 2025," افغانستان, n.d., <https://afghanistan.un.org/prs/node/293745>

⁴¹ Interview with Dr Shahid Afridi, Expert on Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations, June 4, 2025.

⁴² Interview with FIA Official, June 7, 2025.

2.3. Pakistan-Iran Border

2.3.1. Geographic and Political Overview



Figure 6 Pakistan-Iran Border⁴³

Figure 4 highlights Pakistan's border with Iran, highlighting major crossings between these two states. The border is between Pakistan's province of Balochistan and Iran's province of Sistan.

The Pakistan-Iran border, extending approximately 909 kilometres, demarcates Pakistan's Balochistan province from Iran's Sistan and Balochistan province. Established through agreements in the early 20th century and reaffirmed in 1957, this

⁴³ Created by the Author

boundary has remained largely uncontested.⁴⁴ To enhance security and curb illegal activities, both nations have undertaken extensive border fencing projects. As of early 2025, Pakistan has completed over 91% of its fencing initiative, while Iran has constructed substantial barriers, including a 10-foot-high concrete wall along significant stretches.

2.3.2. Official Border Points and Trade Initiatives

There are four official border crossings between Pakistan and Iran, Taftan-Mirjaveh, Gabd-Rimdan, Mand-Pishin, and the recently inaugurated Kohak-Cheedgi crossing in Panjgur.⁴⁵ Additionally, both countries have agreed to establish six joint border markets to bolster bilateral trade, with three already operational⁴⁶. Despite these collaborative efforts, this border presents complex security challenges, including cross-border militant activities.

2.3.3. Bilateral Engagement and Security Coordination

However, Pakistan and Iran do not have any active conflict or dispute, the only major issue is how to control the cross-border movement of militants and terrorists.⁴⁷ Both countries have similar policies towards the independence movements in Pakistani and Iranian Balochistan, seeking to quell the *Greater Balochistan* movement through force.⁴⁸ Iran has initiated the construction of a 300-kilometre wall along its border with Pakistan to prevent cross-border terrorism and smuggling.

⁴⁴ "Grievances Provoke Surge in Baloch Separatist Militancy on Both Sides of Pakistan–Iran Border - Jamestown," Jamestown, July 9, 2024, <https://jamestown.org/program/grievances-provoke-surge-in-baloch-separatist-militancy-on-both-sides-of-pakistan-iran-border/>

⁴⁵ Mariyam Suleman Anees, "Iran-Pakistan Border Trade: Flourishing Against the Odds," *The Diplomat*, January 30, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/01/iran-pakistan-border-trade-flourishing-against-the-odds/>.

⁴⁶ News Desk, "Pakistan Sets up Three Markets Near Iran Border," *The Express Tribune*, June 2, 2021, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2302870/pakistan-sets-up-three-markets-near-iran-border>.

⁴⁷ Interview with Ambassador Aizaz Ahmed Chaudary, June 7, 2025.

⁴⁸ Babar Ayaz, *What's Wrong with Pakistan?* (New Delhi: Hay House Publishers (India), 2013), 364.

While the two nations generally maintain good relations, they have frequently accused each other of failing to secure the border. In January 2024⁴⁹, this resulted in cross-border strikes by Iran on Pakistan targeting alleged militant groups. Pakistan not only condemned these strikes as a violation of its airspace but also took retaliatory actions.⁵⁰ Since then, both countries have engaged in diplomatic efforts to manage border security and prevent further escalation.

2.3.4. Cross-Border Mobility and Documentation Practices

There is a high volume of people-to-people movement on this border, with more than 100,000 individuals crossing the border every day⁵¹. This huge influx of people has made management difficult. At the airport, only passports are accepted.⁵² Pakistan has refused to accept old documents issued by Iran, while Iran continues to issue such documents. Iran's systems are not advanced. An Integrated Border Management System (IBMS) was implemented there, but it was outdated and lacked modern technological capabilities.⁵³

2.4. Institutional Roles in Pakistan's Border Management

Pakistan's borders are managed by a coordinated network of federal paramilitary and governmental agencies, each with specific roles. The Frontier Corps (FC) offers supervisory support by the Pakistan Army under the Ministry of Interior, patrols and secures the western borders with Afghanistan and Iran, conducting counter-insurgency, anti-smuggling, and law-and-order operations in tribal and frontier

⁴⁹ "Making Sense of Iran-Pakistan Cross-Border Strikes," United States Institute of Peace, n.d., <https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/01/making-sense-iran-pakistan-cross-border-strikes>.

⁵⁰ "Making Sense of Iran-Pakistan Cross-Border Strikes," United States Institute of Peace, n.d., <https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/01/making-sense-iran-pakistan-cross-border-strikes>.

⁵¹ Interview with FIA Official, June 7, 2025.

⁵² Interview with FIA Official, June 7, 2025.

⁵³ Interview with FIA Official, June 7, 2025.

regions.⁵⁴ The Pakistan Rangers, divided into Punjab and Sindh wings under the Interior Ministry, guard the eastern border with India, uphold internal security, and assist in counter-terrorism efforts.⁵⁵ Pakistan Customs, working alongside these forces, oversees trade facilitation and ensures equitable commercial transactions at border crossings.⁵⁶

The Federal Investigation Agency's Integrated Border Management System (IBMS) is significant among all of these. The IBMS was created in response to the 2001 attack on the Twin Towers and the War on Terror.⁵⁷ Pakistan was a frontline state in the War on Terror, and there was a need to secure the border with Afghanistan. It became necessary to digitise the border and create a central database system so that entry and exit records could be maintained. The main objective was to upload the data of entries and exits from Pakistan in real-time and maintain it in a central database system. At present, a record of 2,200 travellers from Pakistan is available⁵⁸. One key benefit is the ability to retrieve information in real-time about any suspect or culprit. This has been helpful in tracking the movement of such individuals, whether inside or outside Pakistan. If someone is outside Pakistan, their name is placed on a stop list, which is maintained by IBMS. There are three types of lists:

2.4.1. ECL (Exit Control List) - Approved by the federal government.

⁵⁴ William G. Rosenau, *Irksome and Unpopular Duties: Pakistan's Frontier Corps, Local Security Forces and Counterinsurgency*, ADA 562440 (Alexandria, VA: Center for Naval Analyses, May 1, 2012), https://archive.org/details/DTIC_ADA562440.

⁵⁵ Laurent Gayer, "The Pakistan Rangers: From Border Defense to Internal 'Protection,'" *ResearchGate*, April 2011, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/304601002_The_Pakistan_Rangers_From_Border_Defense_to_Internal_Protection.

⁵⁶ Laraib Ghaffar, "Customs Engaging Traditional and New Partners with Purpose: Celebrating International Customs Day," *Pakistan Single Window*, January 27, 2024, <https://www.psw.gov.pk/knowledge-base/customs-engaging-traditional-and-new-partners-purpose-celebrating-international-customs-day-laraib-ghaffar-domain-officer-psw>.

⁵⁷ Interview with FIA Official, June 7, 2025.

⁵⁸ Interview with FIA Official, June 7, 2025.

2.4.2. PCL (Passport Control List) - Managed by the Bureau of Immigration and Passports.

2.4.3. PNIL (Provisional National Identification List) - This allows the FIA to place a name on it for 30 days if there is a charge or suspicion.

The IBMS is a part of the FIA. The IBMS directorate is located in the FIA Headquarters and is overseen by the ADG - Additional Director General Immigration⁵⁹. This involves information sharing and coordination. For example, stop lists are maintained. If someone needs to be placed on PNIL, the concerned authority contacts the FIA. Similarly, if information is required about a person's travel history, that data is shared. Interpol red notices are also integrated into the system. When Interpol issues a red notice, they inform the authorities, and the details are uploaded into the system. In this way, support is provided to law enforcement and security agencies. With technological evolution, it is essential to stay updated. Globally, facial recognition systems are being implemented, and in Pakistan, a new system called IBMS 2.0 has been developed⁶⁰. It includes facial recognition, biometric verification, and plug-ins for previously identified shortcomings. New features have been introduced. The systems are state-of-the-art and can easily detect and retrieve data.

As mentioned, when someone presents documents at the time of arrival or departure, the information is entered through the computer using IBMS software. This data is updated in real-time and saved in the centralised system. In cases of departure, if a person does not fulfil legal requirements, such as having an invalid profile, visa issues, or passport expiry, they are offloaded, meaning permission to exit Pakistan is denied. The offload is saved in the system. The next time the same person travels, an

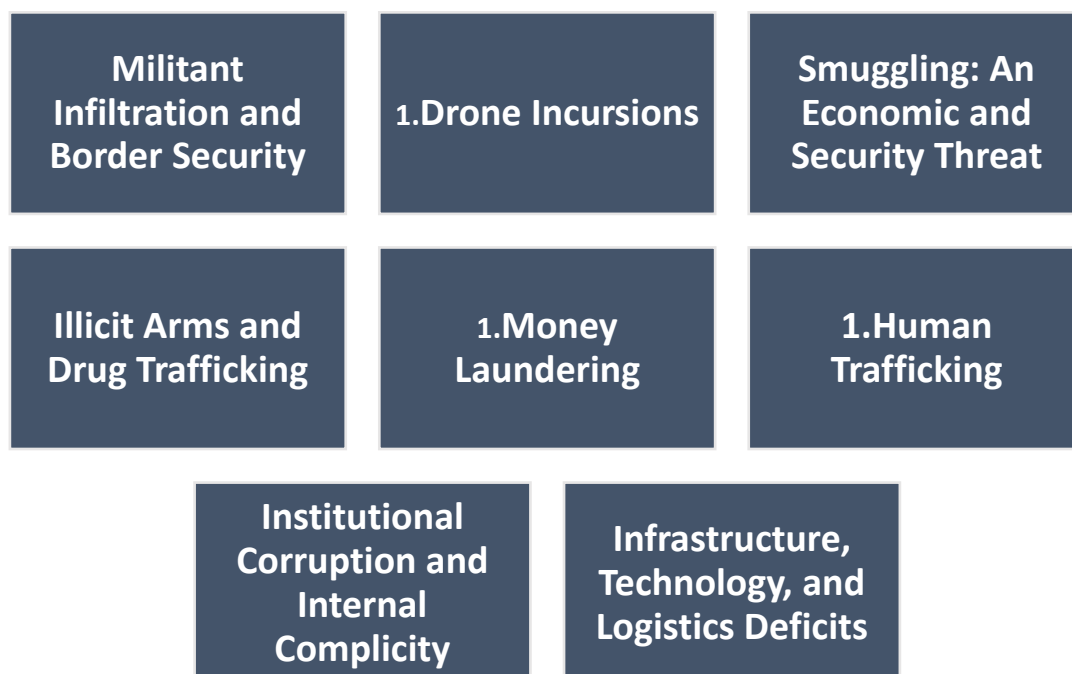
⁵⁹ Interview with FIA Official, June 7, 2025.

⁶⁰ Interview with FIA Official, June 7, 2025.

alert is placed for stricter profiling. Similarly, when deportees arrive from other countries, whether due to overstaying, illegal entry, or begging, their information is stored in the system. Upon their next travel attempt, their record is flagged. This enables assessment of whether their previous history raises concerns, and additional measures can be taken accordingly. This improves profiling and supports reforms, strengthening border management in Pakistan⁶¹.

3. KEY CHALLENGES ALONG PAKISTAN'S BORDERS

Building on the border management discussion, it is evident that Pakistan continues to face significant challenges along its borders that threaten its national security, economic stability, and institutional integrity. The following analysis outlines these key challenges, supported by specific cases drawn from Pakistan's borders with Iran, Afghanistan, and India.



⁶¹ Interview with FIA Official, June 7, 2025.

Figure 7 Key Challenges on Pakistan's Border with India, Afghanistan and Iran⁶²

3.1. Militant Infiltration and Border Security

The unauthorised crossing of militants across Pakistan's borders, particularly from Afghanistan and India, exacerbates security threats. These infiltrations challenge country's ability to maintain effective border security and counterterrorism measures. Infiltration by militant groups remains a critical threat, and the most significant recent incident occurred in April 2024, when security forces neutralised 54 militants attempting to cross into North Waziristan, the largest single loss inflicted on the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) to date.⁶³ Moreover, in March 2025, Pakistani forces killed 16 militants attempting to infiltrate from Afghanistan into North Waziristan. Subsequent operations in April resulted in the deaths of 71 militants over several days. Pakistan condemns the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) for using Afghan territory as a base for attacks, a claim denied by the Afghan Taliban. Despite fencing and surveillance efforts, militants continue to exploit weak points in border enforcement, supported by local smuggling and trafficking networks.

3.1.1. Drone Infiltration

Drone incursions across the Pakistan-India border underscore a serious and evolving security challenge. Pakistani forces have repeatedly downed Indian-operated drones used for surveillance and intelligence gathering. On 15 July 2015, the Pakistan Army reported shooting down an Indian "spy drone" near Bhimber in Azad Jammu and Kashmir, a DJI Phantom-style quadcopter allegedly capturing images of Pakistan's

⁶² Created by the Author

⁶³ Umer Farooq and Pazir Gull, "Security Forces Foil Infiltration Attempt from Afghanistan," *Dawn*, April 28, 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1906962>.

area, prompting Islamabad to summon the Indian High Commissioner⁶⁴. Again, on 27 October 2017, Pakistani military officials confirmed that an Indian quadcopter had been shot down in the Rakhchikri sector of the Line of Control⁶⁵. These incidents highlight persistent surveillance threats from low-cost drones that continue to breach airspace.

3.2. Smuggling: An Economic and Security Threat

Smuggling is one of the most concerning issues Pakistan is facing on its borders. It does not only entail revenue losses but also fuels underground markets. Particularly at the borders with Iran and Afghanistan, it also contributes to security vulnerabilities.

The prevalence of illicit trade between Afghanistan and Pakistan has deep historical and structural roots. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC)⁶⁶ observed in its June 2022 report that the Taliban demolished roadside checkpoints, which were originally designed to govern cross-border revenue, allowing for the continuation of illegal movements that serve as key funding sources for the terror group. Besides, the Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (ATT) of 1965⁶⁷, designed to facilitate trade, has inadvertently exacerbated the issue of smuggling. Goods destined for Afghanistan are often sold in Pakistan without paying tariffs. Recent estimates reveal

⁶⁴ Mateen Haider, "Pakistan Military Shoots Down Indian 'Spy Drone'," *DAWN*, July 15, 2015, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1194644/pakistan-military-shoots-down-indian-spy-drone>.

⁶⁵ Tariq Naqash, "Pakistan Downs Indian Spy Drone in AJK," *DAWN*, October 28, 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1366740/pakistan-downs-indian-spy-drone-in-ajk>.

⁶⁶ Manahil Jaffer, "Rampant Smuggling across Afghan-Pak Border Jeopardising Regional Security," *South Asia Monitor*, August 5, 2024, <https://www.southasiamonitor.org/spotlight/rampant-smuggling-across-afghan-pak-border-jeopardising-regional-security>.

⁶⁷ Muhammad Owais, Ashfaq Ahmed, and Ishaque Ahmad, "Transit Trade Agreements between Afghanistan and Pakistan: A Comparative Study of 1965 and 2010," *Pakistan Social Sciences Review* 2, no. 1 (June 2018): 130–45, <https://pssr.org.pk/issues/v2/1/transit-trade-agreements-between-afghanistan-and-pakistan-a-comparative-study-of-1965-and-2010.pdf>.

that smuggling volumes surged from 2.287 billion to 3.731 billion dollars, accounting for 63 percent of the trade volume.⁶⁸

Moreover, fuel smuggling is rampant at the Pakistan-Iran border. Despite government crackdowns, an estimated 100 to 200 smugglers continue to operate, down from a previous high of around 4,000.⁶⁹ It reflects underlying structural factors. This practice has become entrenched owing to a lack of consistency and effectiveness of policies. Contributing to its persistence is the economic reliance of local populations on low-cost fuel from across the border, particularly in the context of relatively high domestic prices and inadequate formal fuel distribution networks in these peripheral regions.

3.2.1. Illicit Arms and Drug Trafficking

The illegal trade of weapons and drugs, particularly across the porous Afghan border, destabilises Pakistan's internal security. These criminal activities fuel violence, corruption, and terrorism, posing severe risks to national security. A report by the Small Arms Survey titled *"Documenting Arms Availability in Afghanistan"* (2024) reveals that both Soviet and NATO-pattern weapons remain widely accessible in Pakistan's tribal belt. In provinces like Khyber, Bajaur, and North Waziristan, M4 rifles are sold for 3,325-3,700 dollars, significantly cheaper than in Afghan regions like Khost and Nangarhar, where prices range from 3,722 dollars to over 4,000 dollars. M16 rifles in Pakistan are priced at 1,245-1,400 dollars, compared to 1,824–3,065 dollars in

⁶⁸ Manahil Jaffer, "Rampant Smuggling across Afghan-Pak Border Jeopardising Regional Security," *South Asia Monitor*, August 5, 2024, <https://www.southasiamonitor.org/spotlight/rampant-smuggling-across-afghan-pak-border-jeopardising-regional-security>.

⁶⁹ Profit by *Pakistan Today*, "200 Smugglers Continue Illegal Petrol and Diesel Imports through Pak-Iran Border," *Pakistan Today*, February 19, 2025, <https://profit.pakistantoday.com.pk/2025/02/19/200-smugglers-continue-illegal-petrol-and-diesel-imports-through-pak-iran-border/>.

Afghanistan.⁷⁰ The price discrepancy points to an entrenched arms trafficking network operating between the two countries.

Moreover, the eastern border with India sees significant drug trafficking activity, particularly involving narcotics. A notable incident in Lahore's Barki area revealed the use of drones by two police officers to smuggle heroin across the border. They had sourced 10 kilograms of heroin, with 6.5 kilograms worth over 16 million rupees seized during the raid. Payments were reportedly made through Hundi, exposing links between smuggling and informal money laundering networks.⁷¹

3.2.2. Money Laundering

The Pakistan-Iran frontier also faces a challenge of money laundering. FIA estimated that approximately 10 million dollars⁷² in foreign currency are being smuggled daily via land and air posts, about 60 percent⁷³ of this volume transits the western borders, including Taftan. Intelligence reports further indicate that informal systems like hundi/hawala, often linked to Iranian state actors and militant networks, facilitate the laundering of these illicit funds across the Taftan junction.⁷⁴ Despite occasional crackdowns like border closures and bilateral agreements, entrenched smuggling channels and the frontier's permeability continue to undermine Pakistan's fiscal integrity through tax evasion and illegal trade.

⁷⁰ TN Web Desk, "Illicit Arms Trafficking 'Persists' along Pakistan–Afghanistan Border," *The News International*, April 4, 2025, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/1297857-illicit-arms-trafficking-persists-along-afghanistan-pakistan-border>.

⁷¹ Asif Chaudhry, "Cross-Border Drugs Racket Busted; Two Cops Arrested," *Dawn*, January 21, 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1886709>.

⁷² Naimat Khan, "Probe Says \$10m Smuggled Through Pakistan Airports, Borders Every Day," *Arab News PK*, October 11, 2018, <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/1386206/pakistan>.

⁷³ Naimat Khan, "Probe Says \$10m Smuggled Through Pakistan Airports, Borders Every Day," *Arab News PK*, October 11, 2018, <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/1386206/pakistan>.

⁷⁴ Arab News, "Pakistan Probe Links Iranian Supreme Leader's Representative to Money Laundering," *Arab News*, April 10, 2022, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2059986/world>.

3.3. Human Trafficking

Human trafficking is another cross-border crisis affecting Pakistan, particularly along its porous and rugged western borders with Iran and Afghanistan. Balochistan province has been used as a corridor for human smugglers, who operate four key land routes connecting Pakistan to Iran, Turkey, and ultimately Europe. The most infamous is the Nokundi route,⁷⁵ originating from Dak in Chagai district. Other active routes include the corridor from Karachi via National Highway (N-25) to Zahedan, a route through Karachi, Lasbela, and Kech, and another connecting Quetta to Taftan, Mashkel, and Rajay, all serving as passage into Iran.⁷⁶ The Afghan connection is also significant, with many victims driven by economic hardship and political instability.

3.4. Institutional Corruption and Internal Complicity

Corruption within Pakistan's border control agencies allows illegal activities, such as smuggling and militant infiltration, to thrive. Internal complicity among certain officials further weakens efforts to address border-related security challenges. For instance, FBR's probe into 59 Customs officials accused of aiding oil smuggling following intelligence reports implicating them in the smuggling of solvent oil from Iran to Punjab via Taftan border.⁷⁷ Additionally, the arrest of police officers engaged in heroin trafficking, reveal how institutional complicity undermines state efforts. In the

⁷⁵ Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, *Human Smuggling and Trafficking in Pakistan: Vulnerabilities, Challenges, and Remedial Measures*, July 2020, accessed July 15, 2025, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Human-Smuggling-and-Trafficking.pdf>.

⁷⁶ "Human Trafficking: The Dark Side of Pakistan's Migration Rush," Geo News, n.d., <https://www.geo.tv/latest/596436-human-trafficking-the-dark-side-of-pakistans-migration-rush>.

⁷⁷ *The Newspaper's Staff Reporter*, "59 Customs Officials from Multan and Sargodha Being Probed for 'Iranian Oil Smuggling'," *Dawn*, October 10, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1864180#:~:text=LAHORE%3A%20On%20the%20directions%20of%20the%20Federal%20Board,oil%20from%20Iran%20to%20Punjab%20via%20Taftan%20border>.

Lahore incident, the suspects were related to a Station House Officer (SHO)⁷⁸, suggesting that criminal networks are being protected by those in positions of authority. That makes the process of managing borders more intricate.

3.5. Infrastructure, Technology, and Logistics Deficits

The lack of modern infrastructure, technology, and efficient logistics along Pakistan's borders limits its ability to control movements and track threats. These deficits contribute to the country's vulnerability to border-based threats and hinder effective enforcement. Key points such as Taftan, Torkham, and Gabad suffer from severe infrastructure deficits. These areas are geographically remote and face law-and-order issues, yet lack basic amenities such as permanent office buildings, housing, and communication systems. At Torkham, customs operations are still carried out in containers due to the absence of permanent structures.⁷⁹

Technology-related challenges are also prominent. Pakistan's facial recognition and biometric verification systems are outdated and underfunded. For example, if an individual re-enters Pakistan after a decade, facial recognition systems may fail to identify them due to natural ageing and lack of updated data. These "technical glitches," though minor individually, collectively compromise security.⁸⁰

To sum this up, the convergence of security, economic, and institutional challenges across Pakistan's border regions underscores the complexity of the situation and points to the necessity of strategic and coordinated responses.

⁷⁸ Asif Chaudhry, "Cross-Border Drugs Racket Busted; Two Cops Arrested," *Dawn*, January 21, 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1886709>.

⁷⁹ Interview with FIA Official, June 7, 2025.

⁸⁰ Interview with FIA Official, June 7, 2025.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Building on the analysis, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen Pakistan's border security and promote regional stability. These are outlined as follows:

5.1. Strategic Diplomacy, Dialogue, and Regional Cooperation

With India, diplomatic engagement should be expanded beyond the limited weekly calls between DGMOs. While high-level dialogue Track 1 may not currently be feasible due to political resistance, Pakistan should remain open to Track 2 and Track 3 initiatives including civil society dialogues, academic exchanges, and people-to-people contact.

With Afghanistan, extensive diplomatic engagement needs to be implemented at multiple levels including political, parliamentary, religious, and societal. The involvement of actors like China and the possibility of extending the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) into Afghanistan can offer an opportunity for trilateral cooperation as well.

Additionally, greater diplomatic representation at border crossings is necessary to ensure immediate de-escalation of incidents and foster trust. Close liaison with Iranian border authorities and intelligence agencies should be worked upon to control militant movement and smuggling networks.

5.2. Infrastructure, Technology, and Logistical Development

Since key border points such as Taftan, Torkham, and Gabad continue to suffer from significant infrastructural deficiencies, thereby, to address these gaps require sustained investment in permanent infrastructure, logistics, and advanced surveillance

systems. To maintain the effectiveness of technological tools used for identity verification and threat detection, it is essential to ensure regular system upgrades and adequate financial support. Additionally, professional training and exposure to international best practices can contribute to strengthening Pakistan's border management capabilities.

5.3. Unified Governance, Interagency Coordination, and Policy

Integration

There is a pressing need for improved coherence, synchronisation, and coordination at all levels, local, provincial, and federal. Strategic alignment across intelligence, military, and law enforcement bodies should also be established to counter regional threats and improve cooperation with neighbouring countries like Afghanistan and Iran. Policy-making needs to be based on on-the-ground realities. Field officers need to be consulted when introducing new policies such as visa-free entry schemes along with clearly defining the provisions, caveats, and contingency measures.⁸¹

5.4. Economic Engagement and Trade-Led Stability

Pakistan ought to shift its border strategy from militarisation to economic integration, particularly with Afghanistan since there is a need to formalise border markets. Pakistan needs to create regulated trade corridors that encourage lawful commerce and suppress smuggling incentives. Economic incentives can help transform conflict-prone borders into zones of stability and shared prosperity.

⁸¹ Interview with FIA Official, June 7, 2025.

5.5. Joint Training, Human-Centred Security, and Cultural Awareness

Security personnel stationed at the borders should undergo collective and joint training programmes. These should be conducted in cities of Pakistan with reciprocal sessions in other country's cities. Such training would enhance operational understanding, familiarise staff with cross-border protocols, and build cultural competence regarding local communities on both sides.

5.6. Shift in Mindset and Narrative Transformation

A fundamental shift in strategic thinking is essential. The prevailing zero-sum mindset should be replaced with a positive-sum approach that promotes mutual benefit. Change needs to begin intellectually and diplomatically. There is a need to reclaim narrative space through media, education, and diplomacy to support cooperative and future-focused policies.⁸²

6. CONCLUSION

The eastern and western borders of Pakistan are different in nature but geography shapes threat interdependence. On the eastern side, there is a threat of misadventure by India and cross-border smuggling occurs, the western side faces multiple issues such as illegal migration, illicit trade and smuggling, and most importantly, insurgency. It is all part of broader regional dynamics. Therefore, a multitude of steps are essential for Pakistan to take, to ensure security, economic stability, and better diplomatic relations with neighbouring states. While there have been some positive developments, such as legal exports to adjacent states and successful counter-terror

⁸² Interview with Dr Shahid Afridi, Expert on Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations, June 4, 2025.

operations along the borders, these must be scaled into a sustained and coherent national strategy. Border management in Pakistan must move beyond reactive enforcement toward proactive, intelligence-driven, and institutionally robust governance.

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