

## Even where Pakistani Law Exists, Taliban Find a Porous Border

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*Matiullah Achakzai/European Pressphoto Agency - A recent traffic jam in Pakistan between the border town of Chaman and Quetta. Lax security at the border allows Taliban fighters to slip back and forth.*

The thick brown sack that a man named Abdulmalek carried over his shoulder on a recent afternoon might have contained anything: weapons, drugs or explosives. But crossing back and forth between Afghanistan and Pakistan was no problem, he said.

Afghan border guards never search him, even though he passes through this bustling crossing four or five times a week. "What searching?" said Mr. Abdulmalek, a 34-year-old clothing store owner who like many Afghans has only one name. "There is no searching."

Other Afghans say they can easily enter Pakistan by bribing guards on either side of the border with the equivalent of less than a dollar, or by paying taxi drivers a similarly token amount to drive them across. The guards do not ask those in the taxi for identification or search the trunk.

The way the Taliban use Pakistan's tribal areas to launch cross-border attacks inside Afghanistan is perhaps the most contentious issue between Pakistan and the United States. But the problem is hardly contained to Pakistan's lawless tribal areas.

Gaping holes in security checks along the border also remain at heavily trafficked crossings, like this one, in Baluchistan Province, where, American officials say, the Taliban's leaders have taken refuge, out of reach of American and NATO forces.

The Chaman crossing — marked on the Pakistani side by the three-story Friendship Gate — should presumably be among the most secure in the country: it is the sole crossing between Kandahar, the birthplace of the Afghan Taliban, and Baluchistan, which is, according to American officials, home to Taliban commanders who control many Afghan fighters.

But Taliban fighters — anyone, really — can cross and smuggle weapons and drugs, underscoring the challenge to the American war effort in Afghanistan, for which the border presents a much firmer barrier, as Pakistan does not allow NATO or American military forces to cross.

The result is that Taliban fighters and smugglers control much of the rugged 1,500-mile frontier between Afghanistan and Pakistan, creating a fluid battle space for the insurgents as the Taliban conduct an increasingly coordinated fight in both countries.

Pakistani and Afghan officials blame one another for the lack of border security and the threats it poses, typical of the distrust and lack of coordination between the governments.

American and NATO forces are faulted as well. "The Afghans are indeed of no real help there, but neither are the NATO or U.S. troops," a senior Western intelligence official said.

Pakistani commanders complain that the United States and other NATO governments have given them almost none of the equipment needed to improve security or prevent Taliban fighters from crossing easily.

"They may be crossing through Chaman, all right," said Maj. Gen. Salim Nawaz, the commander of the Pakistani Frontier Corps, the paramilitary force responsible for securing the border here, referring to the Taliban. He said Pakistani forces had arrested militants elsewhere in the province, but he added, "They don't cross with weapons, so how will you separate them from ordinary people?"

A senior American military official who tracks border issues did not dispute the Pakistanis' impression of border problems and said more equipment would be sent. But the official added that there were shortcomings on the Pakistani side as well.

"There are probably enough problems to go around on both sides," the official said.

The situation is even more stark along more rural stretches of the 700-mile border between Afghanistan and Baluchistan, which has 276 posts on the Pakistani side. At one post near the city of Nushki, a Pakistani border commander, Col. Javed Nasir, admitted that trucks full of hashish, opium and heroin regularly eluded border security officials and entered Pakistan. Many shipments are later sold for millions of dollars that end up paying for Taliban weapons and salaries.

"There is a lot of narcotics smuggling going on," Colonel Nasir said. "But our biggest concern are the weapons that are coming in from Afghanistan."

During his yearlong assignment at the border, Colonel Nasir said, he has never seen an American or NATO soldier on the other side. Peering across the border at an Afghan outpost — one of only two Afghan posts, he said, for one 120-mile stretch of border — he said that the handful of Afghan soldiers on the other side showed little interest in patrolling.

Meanwhile, for the Americans, the border crossing poses another problem: with the pending arrival of 30,000 more troops in southern Afghanistan as part of President Obama's military buildup, American commanders want to increase the traffic of supplies through Chaman by 30 percent. On a typical day, 60 to 100 NATO and American supply trucks pass through the crossing.

But that effort has been seriously hampered by a detour that has shifted vehicle traffic to a one-lane dirt road across the border that can handle only one truck at a time, in either direction. The main gate has been closed to vehicles — but not pedestrians — because of problems with the infrastructure.

American officials want to improve the bypass, but those efforts have suffered delays. Military officials also fear having supply trucks backed up at the crossing, leaving them vulnerable to an attack.

"My worry is that we have a four-lane highway that ends up leading to a dirt road," the senior American military official said, noting that the crossing needed improvements on both sides.

The problems are further complicated by the commander on the Afghan side, Col. Abdul Raziq, according to Pakistani and Western officials. They say that Colonel Raziq, who is politically close to the government of President Hamid Karzai, uses his control of the border region around the city of Spinbaldak to reap millions of dollars from smuggling.

In exchange for securing the road from Spinbaldak to Kandahar and keeping the Taliban at bay, Pakistani officials say, Colonel Raziq is allowed to operate with impunity and can manipulate the border to benefit his smuggling interests. He sometimes shuts the border, they say, charging smugglers to cross.

Colonel Raziq sharply disputed the allegations, saying that his men vigorously searched people coming through the border. He also blamed a land dispute with Pakistan for the delay in improving the border crossing.

"I have never closed the border, nor will I," he said. "I am very strict with smugglers."

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