Afghanistan Five Years On: A Look Through the SAT Study

- **Format:** Webinar
- **Date:** 29 September, 2026
- **Moderator:** Amna Hassan
- **Speakers:** Dr Lutfur Rehman, PhD in IR, 16 years of work on the Durand Line and Pakistan relations; Syed Jawad Hussain Kazmi, Founder, Khyber Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and Chairman, Pakistan Borders Trade Council
- **Keynote Address and Closing Remarks**: Salman Javed, Director General, PAYF

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Pak Asia Youth Forum (PAYF) hosted a webinar marking five years since the Taliban's return to power in Kabul in August 2021. The discussion was anchored in a recent South Asia Times (SAT) study, *"Taliban 2.0: The Five-Year Ledger"*, whose central argument is that Afghanistan under the Taliban reflects institutional evolution without ideological rupture: the same doctrine, now more institutionalised.

The moderator used the study's findings on education, media, militancy, trade and refugee repatriation as starting points. Two speakers were invited to add context and challenge the study where possible. Dr Lutfur Rehman examined the historical and political dimensions of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border and the Taliban's position on it. Syed Jawad Hussain Kazmi explained the economic cost of border closures for traders and industry on both sides.

The discussion converged on several points. Border management cannot be separated from history, and border closures have imposed heavy losses on both countries, while alternative trade routes have proved costlier and unworkable. Security and trade must be pursued together, and the Taliban leadership is expected

to ensure that Afghan soil is not used against Pakistan. Dialogue and a workable border mechanism were presented as the way forward.

Through this X Space, PAYF will bring education activists and relevant voices together to discuss this governance gap. The conversation will look at whether smaller and properly empowered administrative units can bring decision-making closer to people, improve education services and make local administration more accountable. The broader question is: can bringing government closer to the people help bridge the gap between the state and its citizens?

OPENING REMARKS

Moderator Amna Hassan opened the session by noting that August marked five years since the Taliban returned to power in Kabul. She introduced the SAT study and its central argument of institutional evolution without ideological rupture. She then presented its key findings:

- 1.1 million secondary-age girls are out of school.
- 219 of 547 media outlets have been closed.
- More than 20 militant organisations have been identified on Afghan soil.
- Pakistan-Afghanistan bilateral trade fell from $2.46 billion to $1.7 billion.
- More than 1.7 million illegal Afghan refugees have been repatriated.

She said these figures would serve as starting points, and that the guests were there to add context and challenge the argument where possible.

HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS OF BORDER MANAGEMENT

***Dr Lutfur Rehman**, PhD in IR; 16 years of work on the Durand Line and Pakistan relations*

Asked why the border mechanisms tried since 2021 (diplomatic meetings, flag meetings and other channels) have failed to stop cross-border militant attacks, border closures and military escalation, Dr Rehman said border management must begin with an understanding of how the border came into being. He explained that the border was settled through agreements between British India and Afghanistan and then demarcated on the ground by three commissions in 1895-96. Each took between two and three years, and the first was the Baloch-Afghan Boundary Commission, in which Afghan representatives and Henry McMahon of British India took part. He noted that McMahon, who headed the commission, later demarcated the China-India border known as the McMahon Line, and that the demarcation in Balochistan involved around 750 people.

BORDER CLOSURES AND THE ECONOMIC COST

***Syed Jawad Hussain Kazmi,** Founder, Khyber Chamber of Commerce and Industry; Chairman, Pakistan Borders Trade Council*

Mr Kazmi said the decline in trade is causing heavy losses on both sides. Borders are closed repeatedly and without notice, which erodes trust between traders. Traders in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and domestic trade, all suffer. He said the border has been closed for almost a year, after an earlier closure of about three months, and that the business community has lost millions of dollars in revenue and has been affected across the board.

He stressed that the route through Afghanistan was Pakistan's link to Central Asia, including Iran, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, and that Pakistan has lost markets as a result. He said trade should not be treated as a security problem.

- **Impact on industry:** Pakistani industry has also suffered, including small industries in Gujrat that supplied surgical instruments, sports goods and clothing to Central Asia. Farmers have been hit as well, since fruit and vegetable trade is seasonal and the seasons in the two countries overlap, so losses fall on both sides.
- **Business community engagement:** To address these problems, the Pakistan Borders Trade Council works on bilateral trade. Mr. Kazmi reported three to four meetings with Afghan business federations and leading traders, and said their message had been conveyed to their government. Pakistan's core demand, he said, is that Afghan soil must not be used for terrorism against Pakistan. He said Pakistan's government is ready to negotiate and reopen the border and that a mechanism can be built through talks.

He said mediation efforts by Qatar, China, Turkey and Saudi Arabia had been attempted, but that some elements sometimes try to sabotage negotiations. He argued that where there is no peace, there cannot be trade, and that peace in Afghanistan means peace in Pakistan. He also noted that Pakistan has supported Afghans for some 40 years, and that Afghans living and working in Pakistan will eventually return home, so stability there matters for both sides.

SOVEREIGNTY, RECOGNITION AND THE DURAND LINE

Dr. Lutfur Rehman

Asked how the study's finding that Taliban sovereignty rests more on ideology than on borders fits with their position on the Durand Line, how it differs from the Karzai and Ghani governments, and what practical problems the absence of recognition

creates, Dr Rehman said the Taliban have now been in power for over five years, and only Russia has recognised them. He called this a major setback for the Taliban. Even India, with which they have good relations, has not recognised them. He said Pakistan, as their neighbour, would have recognised the government and used its international influence on its behalf had terrorism not intervened. Pakistan made efforts in the beginning, he said, but stopped because of terrorism.

He said the Taliban's border policy continues a line taken since 1947, but has become more extreme. He cited the Taliban delegation's objection in Doha to the word "border" in the text, describing this as unprecedented in talks between the two countries since 1947. He added that Taliban leadership says it does not accept visas and passports, on the claim that half of its territory lies in Pakistan. In his view such claims are easy to make and very difficult to implement, and emotional claims do not solve problems; a rational approach is needed.

He noted the shared history, language, religion and clothing of the two peoples, and asked why they should not live with love and affection. He said increased trade would bring prosperity and help end terrorism, but that this requires strong determination from the Taliban leadership.

ALTERNATIVE ROUTES AND THE FUTURE OF TRADE

Syed Jawad Hussain Kazmi

Asked whether border closures are a temporary response or whether the shift toward Chabahar and Central Asian routes could make Pakistan a sideline, Mr Kazmi said Afghan traders do not think of alternatives by choice; they turn to them when borders are closed, and connectivity is cut. The past seven to eight months, he said, were a bitter experience for them. Pakistani traders tried alternatives too, such as potatoes to Russia and citrus via Iran, or through China and Tajikistan, and found them unviable, with heavy losses for traders, farmers and industry.

He explained why the trade matters so much to Afghanistan. Afghanistan is landlocked and produces little for export, so its traders take goods from Pakistan and re-export them to Central Asia, Russia, Iran and Turkey, earning revenue and foreign exchange. Access to Pakistan's seaports is feasible for them in both cost and time. He said the business community is the backbone of any economy through taxation and revenue.

He called for a border management mechanism with governments sitting together to end terrorism, political resolution of disputes, and rescheduling and signing of the Pakistan-Afghan trade agreement so that trade has a proper policy framework. Repeated losses, he warned, will end business trust and trade, and increase unemployment in Afghanistan. A stable Afghanistan would also allow returning Afghans to settle in their own cities.

Dr Lutfur Rehman **added** that Central Asia is a market for Afghanistan but is itself landlocked. Chabahar is more than 500 km from Karachi, so goods would cost more or sell at higher prices. India used to subsidise such trade, and he questioned how long it could continue. Iran's situation is also unstable, with a war going on. Pakistan, he said, remains the shortest and cheapest route for Afghanistan, on the condition that peace comes and terrorism ends.

KEYNOTE ADDRESS AND CLOSING REMARKS

Salman Javed, *Director General, PAYF*

Mr Javed marked five years since the Taliban's return to power in Kabul as an important moment to reassess Afghanistan's trajectory through evidence-based research. He drew attention to the SAT study's findings on education, media freedom, militant presence and the decline in bilateral trade as key areas for discussion, and stressed the need for informed dialogue on the border, trade and security, in which young people have a role.

Summing up the session, he said it had examined Afghanistan five years on from two angles: the historical dimension of the border and the demands of the business community. He noted that the Durand Line issue needs more research and urged participants to read the SAT study to learn more about Pakistan-Afghanistan relations and what the Taliban have become. He thanked the speakers, the participants and the PAYF team for organising the session.

KEY TAKEAWAYS AND POLICY POINTERS

These points are drawn from the speakers' own arguments in the session.

- **Treat history as the starting point of border management.** The demarcation of the border and the Taliban's position on it shape any mechanism that is proposed.
- **Keep trade separate from security disputes.** Repeated closures without notice damage trust and impose losses on both economies.
- **Build a formal border management mechanism.** Governments should sit together, resolve disputes politically, and reschedule and sign the Pakistan-Afghan trade agreement.
- **Keep Afghan soil from being used against Pakistan.** This remains Pakistan's core demand across negotiations.
- **Sustain business-to-business dialogue.** Meetings between the trade bodies of both countries should continue alongside government talks.
- **Recognise the limits of alternative routes.** Chabahar and Central Asian routes are costlier and less viable than the Pakistan route.
- **Invest in further research** on the Durand Line and Pakistan-Afghanistan relations.

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ANNEXURE



