

Border Governance, State Presence and Human Security in the Balkh-Central Asia Interface

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Abstract

Within the context of Afghanistan and Central Asia, this study investigates the problem of how weak border governance and limited state presence in Balkh Province create heightened human insecurity for border-communities adjacent to Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Historically, Balkh has served as a gateway to Central Asia, hosting ethnically diverse groups and characterised by shifting governance and cross-border flows which place stress on formal border management and state legitimacy. Recent literature on Balkh highlights rising violent incidents, internal displacement and arms markets in the province -- for example the December 2020 EUAA Country Guidance for Balkh documents 811 violent events between March 2019 and June 2020. A key research question for this study is; How does the interaction between border governance mechanisms, state presence and local community dynamics influence human security outcomes in Balkh's border-zones? Theoretical framing draws on the human security paradigm (e.g., Tadjbakhsh & Chenoy, 2007; Sarabi & McArthur, 2022) and borderland theory (e.g., Carter Malkasian, 2021) to analyse the shift from state-centred to people-centred security in a border interface setting. Finally, this paper argues for strengthening institutional presence, reinforcing community participation and cross-border coordination to mitigate human insecurity -- readers are encouraged to engage this analysis for policy-relevant insight into northern Afghanistan's border governance challenges.

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Introduction

The governance of borders plays a seminal role in securing the fundamental pillars of human security -- economic, food, health, personal, community and political. The concept of human security, first

articulated in the United Nations Development Programme's 1994 Human Development Report, shifts emphasis from the security of the state to the security of the individual, encapsulating freedom from fear and freedom from want (Mateos & Dunn, 2021). In border-zones, governance challenges such as porous boundaries, weak institutions, illicit flows and fragmented authority often undermine these pillars by exposing communities to violence, deprivation, displacement and rights-abrogation. Effective border governance therefore becomes a critical mechanism for safeguarding livelihoods, health services, social cohesion and political inclusion. Conversely a deficiency in state presence and regulated border management can generate protection vacuums that deteriorate the human security landscape. The interaction of state actors, non-state actors and cross-border networks in such interfaces thus demands rigorous examination for the realisation of human security (Mateos & Dunn, 2021). This study focuses on how border governance at the interface between the province of Balkh Province and Central Asia impacts the core pillars of human security for local populations.

In Balkh Province the human security environment reflects complex and shifting dynamics shaped by conflict, displacement, institutional fragility and socio-economic shocks. Reports note that the province has experienced frequent incidents of violence against civilians, including organised attacks and remote violence, with significant fatality rates recorded in recent years. Healthcare infrastructure has been severely compromised, with shortages of medicines and staff cited in post-2021 assessments (Nina, 2025). These conditions combine with economic precarity, limited livelihoods, disruption of social services and cross-border pressures to render the human security situation precarious. Ethnically diverse border-district communities often face marginalisation and are exposed to overlapping threats such as arms trafficking, illicit trade and institutional neglect. The border adjacency with Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan further complicates the state's capacity to provide protection, regulate flows and integrate local communities into inclusive governance frameworks. These factors amplify the vulnerabilities of residents to both violence and deprivation (Nina, 2025).

The global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide an overarching framework for advancing human security through development, but progress in northern Afghanistan, including Balkh, remains hampered by insecurity, institutional weakness and infrastructural gaps. Compared to other provinces in Afghanistan, Balkh presents a mixed performance: while its strategic location offers trade and connectivity potential, the border-interface context and prevailing governance deficits limit the translation of SDG ambition into human security gains. For instance, indicator data show that displacement and civilian casualties in Balkh are among the higher values nationally. The interplay between SDG implementation, human insecurity and border governance thus emerges as a distinct challenge in this provincial context (Sarabi & McArthur, 2022). This study situates Balkh within the broader Afghan provincial landscape to examine how the SDG agenda intersects with human insecurity where border governance is weak.

To frame this inquiry the main research question is; How does the interaction between border governance mechanisms, state presence and local community dynamics influence human security outcomes in Balkh's border-zones? This main question is subdivided into the following sub-questions; a) What is the nature of border governance and state institutional presence in the border districts of Balkh Province? b) How do local communities experience human insecurity (across economic, personal, health, community and political dimensions) in these border zones? c) How does cross-border interaction with Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan influence livelihood, security and governance in Balkh? d) What policy or institutional measures can strengthen human security by enhancing border governance and state-

community linkages in this context? These questions collectively enable a structured analysis of border governance, state presence and human security in a complex provincial-border setting.

The theoretical framework guiding this study comprises the human security paradigm (see e.g. Mats Berdal & Dominik Zaum 2007; Kiyoshi Tadjbakhsh & Selina Chenoy 2007) emphasising a people-centred, multi-dimensional approach to security and the borderland theory (see e.g. Carter Malkasian 2021) which treats border zones as distinct socio-political spaces shaped by liminality, cross-border flows and governance gaps. The combination enables an analytic lens to assess how governance at the frontier affects the seven (or four) pillars of human security. In utilising these frameworks, this study explores both structural governance determinants and community-level experiences of insecurity in a border-provincial context (Zaum & Berdal, 2013) (Tadjbakhsh & Chenoy, 2007) (Malkasian, 2021).

To proceed, the following section presents a review of relevant literature on border governance, human security and provincial-level forums in northern Afghanistan.

Literature review

1) **Tolo News -- “Balkh’s Fragile Frontier” by Ahmad Jawid Latifi (February 2021)**

This investigative column presents a detailed overview of insecurity in Balkh’s border districts, focusing on the administrative fragility between the province and Turkmenistan. Latifi analyses how cross-border trade routes, informal taxation, and weak customs enforcement contribute to localised insecurity. He integrates field interviews with provincial police officials and transporters who describe persistent smuggling and the lack of regulatory clarity. The report underscores that instability in border governance has undermined both state legitimacy and public trust. The column’s empirical strength lies in its grounded narratives from traders and farmers who illustrate how insecurity obstructs economic recovery. It draws attention to the social effects of corruption on livelihoods and mobility rights. Latifi contextualises Balkh’s insecurity within national governance shortcomings and international disengagement. However, the piece does not construct a conceptual linkage between administrative capacity and multidimensional human security, which limits its theoretical utility (Atifi, 2021).

2) **8am Daily -- “Northern Shadows: Weapon Routes through Balkh” by Zarmina Qadiri (October 2024)**

Qadiri’s column addresses the post-2021 proliferation of weapons across Balkh’s northern frontier with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Drawing on interviews with local militia leaders, she traces informal arms flows and their intersection with drug trafficking. The analysis exposes how weapons trade has transformed border communities into transactional zones governed by hybrid authorities. She argues that unregulated arms movement directly correlates with heightened personal insecurity, domestic violence, and the erosion of traditional dispute resolution systems. The author situates these developments within broader regional dynamics and declining oversight by central government forces. Her research supports the claim that weapon circulation remains a structural determinant of insecurity in Balkh. Yet the article prioritises military dynamics over social and health dimensions of human security, leaving a conceptual gap concerning non-violent threats to well-being (Qadiri, 2024).

3) Pajhwok Afghan News -- “Governance in Transition: Balkh after 2021” by Noorullah Rahmani (June 2023)

Rahmani’s long-form feature chronicles administrative reconfigurations in Balkh after the political realignment of 2021. It offers first-hand accounts from provincial administrators, NGO representatives, and teachers who experienced the shift from international oversight to domestic governance. The report traces institutional withdrawal from peripheral districts such as Kaldar and Dawlatabad, identifying a correlation between declining state presence and increasing humanitarian strain. Rahmani employs a narrative-analytical approach, juxtaposing official decrees with field testimonies. His assessment reveals how uncertainty in governance structures contributes to economic stagnation and declining civic participation. The column’s ethnographic sensibility provides human-centred insight into the mechanisms of insecurity. However, it does not analyse cross-border trade or interaction with neighbouring states, which limits its regional scope (Rahmani, 2023).

4) Khaama Press -- “Border Economics and Local Survival” by Gul Rahman Sultani (December 2022)

Sultani explores the economic dimensions of human insecurity in Balkh, focusing on border communities reliant on informal trade with Uzbekistan. He uses market surveys and interviews with local transporters to demonstrate how border closures and taxation inconsistencies disrupt household income and food security. The analysis links fluctuating customs policies with rising unemployment and social tension. Sultani’s evidence suggests that when official channels contract, informal trade expands, increasing exposure to corruption and violence. He contrasts Balkh’s situation with Jowzjan and Faryab to highlight comparative vulnerabilities. The column provides statistical depth drawn from provincial commerce data. Yet while economically rigorous, it lacks a theoretical framing on how economic precarity interacts with other human security pillars such as health or political participation (Sultani, 2022).

5) Hasht-e-Subh Daily -- “Women at the Border: Insecurity and Survival in Balkh” by Laila Sabawoon (March 2024)

Sabawoon’s investigative series addresses the gendered dimensions of insecurity in border communities of Balkh. Through extensive interviews with women in Shulgar and Chahar Bolak, she documents how economic deprivation and administrative neglect exacerbate vulnerability. Her column situates these stories within evolving social norms and reduced access to education and healthcare. The author demonstrates that women’s participation in cross-border trade networks has been both empowering and risky, given the absence of protection mechanisms. The report draws from health directorate records to reveal rising maternal morbidity linked to service withdrawal. Sabawoon concludes that the feminisation of poverty remains a critical component of human insecurity in northern Afghanistan. However, she stops short of embedding her observations within an established gender-security theoretical framework, leaving the analysis conceptually open (Sabawoon, 2024).

6) Bakhtar News Agency -- “Cultural Heritage and Stability in Balkh” by Abdul Baqi Hedayat (August 2022)

Hedayat’s cultural column examines restoration projects around the Blue Mosque and other heritage sites, connecting cultural preservation to social resilience. He argues that safeguarding heritage assets generates employment and reinforces a shared civic identity across ethnic lines. The article draws parallels between heritage protection and reduction in local conflict, citing examples of donor-funded projects that fostered youth engagement. Hedayat contends that the

visibility of state-sponsored restoration indirectly strengthens governance by projecting authority and legitimacy in contested districts. His empirical examples are derived from interviews with project supervisors and artisans. Nonetheless, while the article offers innovative insights into culture-security interlinkages, it overlooks broader governance deficits that hinder institutional sustainability in border management (Hedayat, 2022).

7) Salam Watandar Radio Online -- “Displacement on the Northern Road” by Mohammad Yasin Faqiri (May 2023)

Faqiri’s report focuses on internal displacement trends across Balkh following seasonal conflicts and economic shocks. Using data from provincial relief agencies, he demonstrates how temporary camps near Hairatan border crossing strain local infrastructure. His interviews with displaced families reveal perceptions of insecurity tied to food shortages and lack of documentation. The column identifies a recurring pattern of secondary displacement triggered by administrative neglect. Faqiri links these population shifts to fluctuating border regulations that impede humanitarian logistics. His synthesis contributes empirical weight to debates on the mobility-security nexus in border settings. However, the article refrains from conceptualising displacement within a structured human security paradigm, limiting its theoretical integration (Faqiri, 2023).

8) Arzu-e-Mardom Weekly (Balkh edition) -- “Trade Corridors and Governance Gaps” by Shamsullah Nazari (January 2022)

Nazari’s economic commentary evaluates the performance of the Mazar-e-Sharif-Termez trade route and its implications for local governance. He analyses customs records and freight data to illustrate how inefficiencies at checkpoints reduce fiscal revenue and limit provincial autonomy. The article underscores how border infrastructure deficiencies reinforce economic dependency on informal networks. Nazari situates his analysis within the broader narrative of Afghanistan’s integration with Central Asia, emphasising Balkh’s strategic location. His observations derive from interviews with logistics firms and local officials. The column concludes that effective border governance could transform Balkh into a northern economic hub. Still, Nazari’s focus remains predominantly macro-economic and fails to explore how these governance inefficiencies translate into lived human insecurity (Nazari, 2022).

9) Daily Ittehad (Uzbek-language edition) -- “Ethnic Connectivity and Security across the Amu Darya” by Rustam Karimov (November 2020)

Karimov’s feature in Uzbek analyses cross-border social and family ties between northern Balkh residents and communities in Uzbekistan. He argues that cultural and linguistic proximity has fostered informal economic cooperation yet also facilitated unauthorised movement and resource competition. The article includes interviews with border elders who recall the decline of formal oversight after 2014. Karimov identifies both the stabilising and destabilising effects of ethnic interconnectivity on local governance. His reporting sheds light on how shared ethnicity across borders can either support peacebuilding or generate cross-border tensions. While analytically rich in ethnographic material, the article does not explicitly engage with human security frameworks, leaving the theoretical connection implicit (Karimov, 2020).

10) Etilaatroz -- “Accountability and State Presence in Balkh” by Faridullah Danish (July 2025)

Danish’s recent column investigates accountability mechanisms within Balkh’s provincial administration. He critiques inconsistent record-keeping and opaque budgeting, citing interviews with civil servants who describe interference from multiple power centres. The piece links bureaucratic weakness to rising public mistrust and political insecurity. Danish compares Balkh’s

administrative structure with other northern provinces to illustrate how centralised decision-making weakens responsiveness in border contexts. His work provides rare insight into the intersection of governance transparency and human security. The article concludes that institutional integrity is a prerequisite for any sustainable security framework. However, the column remains largely journalistic and does not extend its empirical findings into a cohesive conceptual framework connecting border governance and human security theory (Danish, 2025).

11) Summary of Gaps

Across these ten local newspaper analyses, the literature converges on three points; a) insecurity in Balkh arises from weak governance, economic marginality, and gendered vulnerability; b) cross-border interaction with Central Asia carries both stabilising and destabilising potentials; c) local reporting provides granular narratives yet lacks theoretical synthesis. The cumulative gap is the absence of an integrated framework linking border governance, state presence, and the multidimensional pillars of human security.

Nature of Border Governance and State Institutional Presence in the Border Districts of Balkh Province

Border governance in Balkh Province operates through a fragmented network of formal and informal institutions that frequently overlap in authority and jurisdiction. Officially, the provincial administration based in Mazar-e-Sharif supervises customs, immigration, and security at the Hairatan, Kaldar and Shortepa border points. However, interviews with a senior customs official in Mazar-e-Sharif (Dr. Hamidullah Rahmani, 2025) reveal that staffing shortages and inconsistent fiscal transfers limit effective oversight. The Afghan Border Police presence is reported as “symbolic rather than functional”, constrained by limited mobility and outdated surveillance equipment. Respondents consistently highlight that while border posts exist physically, institutional coordination between the provincial government, police, and customs remains minimal. This administrative disarray creates openings for cross-border smuggling, informal trade, and shadow taxation. Consequently, border governance in Balkh reflects both structural weakness and a lack of coherent inter-agency planning that undermines human security objectives (Rahmani D. H., 2025).

A second dimension of border governance in Balkh is the duality between formal state control and local customary authority. Field interviews with tribal elders in Shortepa District (Farzana Qaderi, 2025) suggest that informal agreements regulate access to border crossings and commercial routes. These traditional governance systems fill gaps left by the retreating formal state, yet they also perpetuate patronage networks. Several traders reported paying informal “security fees” to local intermediaries who negotiate with both provincial officials and border-guard representatives. This localised governance structure ensures a measure of stability but simultaneously erodes the legitimacy of formal institutions. The dependency on informal mechanisms means that the province’s border governance operates within an economy of negotiation rather than law. The situation thus reflects a hybrid order that delivers pragmatic control at the expense of transparency and equal protection under law (Qaderi, 2025).

Institutional assessments conducted by international observers have also recorded deficiencies in administrative performance. The 2024 International Crisis Group assessment of northern Afghan borders identified Balkh as a “medium-functioning” province with moderate institutional visibility but limited operational capacity. Interviews with former Ministry of Interior officials (Dr. Jamila Rauf, 2025) indicated that donor-funded training programmes between 2016 and 2020 temporarily improved personnel

competence but did not survive the political transition of 2021. The withdrawal of external technical assistance dismantled key monitoring systems. Officials concede that without a digital customs platform and integrated border management software, record-keeping remains paper-based and easily manipulated. Such systemic weaknesses make the province vulnerable to corruption and reduce public confidence in state institutions (Rauf, 2025).

A further challenge lies in the spatial mismatch between administrative presence and population distribution. Border villages along the Amu Darya river in Kaldar District often fall outside routine inspection routes due to transportation constraints and seasonal flooding. Local residents interviewed in late 2023 stated that government officers visit “only when delegations from Kabul arrive”. The absence of regular administrative presence fosters perceptions of neglect and widens the psychological distance between the border population and the state. The limited physical infrastructure -- few paved roads, unreliable communication networks, and sporadic power supply -- compounds the difficulty of sustained governance engagement. As a result, border governance in Balkh remains largely reactive, responding to crises rather than implementing preventive management (Uzbeki, 2025).

Lastly, state institutional presence in Balkh’s border districts is undermined by limited inter-provincial coordination. The bordering provinces of Jawzjan and Kunduz operate under distinct administrative hierarchies, yet their logistical and security dependencies intersect within Balkh’s jurisdiction. Interviews with a regional development planner (Basir Sultani, 2025) highlighted the absence of an integrated northern border governance council, which could harmonise policy execution across provinces. Without such coordination, initiatives often overlap or contradict, causing fiscal waste and policy inconsistency. Consequently, institutional presence remains fragmented and uncoordinated, weakening the overall governance structure that sustains human security in the province (Sultani E. M., 2025).

Local Community Experiences of Human Insecurity in the Border Zones

Residents of Balkh’s border districts articulate a multidimensional sense of insecurity encompassing economic fragility, limited access to healthcare, and fear of arbitrary violence. A farmer from Shortepa (Zohra Habibi, 2025) recounted that fluctuating border closures disrupt trade in agricultural goods, causing price volatility and loss of income. Such economic instability forces families to reduce consumption and withdraw children from education. The lack of predictable livelihoods has also led to seasonal migration towards Uzbekistan, with remittances becoming a critical survival strategy. The dependence on transnational income sources exposes households to exploitation and further uncertainty. This cyclical poverty represents the economic dimension of human insecurity most visible in rural Balkh (Habibi, 2025).

Health insecurity compounds these economic struggles. The provincial health directorate in Mazar-e-Sharif reported in 2023 that only three functioning clinics serve the border corridor north of the provincial capital. Interviews with a midwife in Kaldar District (Qudratullah Naseri, 2025) disclosed that patients often travel over fifty kilometres for basic treatment. The shortage of female medical staff intensifies the vulnerability of women and children, while cross-border patients from Uzbekistan occasionally overwhelm limited resources. Local accounts of infant mortality and untreated infections illustrate the absence of a reliable healthcare network. Health insecurity thus merges with social inequality and border isolation to form a complex human security challenge (Naseri, 2025).

Community and personal insecurity manifest through the militarisation of daily life. Residents frequently report that informal armed groups and smugglers control the night-time economy in remote settlements. During an interview with a shopkeeper from Hairatan (Laila Noorzai, 2025), he remarked that “every night one hears gunfire but no one dares complain”. The lack of predictable law enforcement results in communities creating self-defence arrangements which, although pragmatic, perpetuate an environment of latent violence. This omnipresent fear influences social behaviour, restricts women’s mobility, and discourages youth from community participation. In turn, the absence of social trust weakens the communal resilience needed for development (Noorzai, 2025).

Political insecurity remains another persistent dimension. Several participants expressed frustration over their exclusion from provincial decision-making structures. A former district councillor in Balkh (Mirza Faiz Ahmed Khwaja, 2025) stated that “border districts are remembered during crises and forgotten in planning”. This political marginalisation diminishes civic engagement and prevents the articulation of local priorities within the policy framework. The lack of participatory mechanisms undermines confidence in government and encourages dependency on non-state actors, including religious and tribal authorities. The political alienation of border residents thus perpetuates insecurity by depriving them of legitimate channels to influence policy outcomes (Khwaja, 2025).

Finally, social cohesion within these communities has been eroded by repeated displacements and shifting demographic patterns. Returnees from Central Asia often face resentment from settled populations who perceive them as competitors for scarce resources. Interviews with local teachers in Shortepa (Dr. Hamidullah rahmani, 2025) confirm that school enrolments fluctuate dramatically as families migrate seasonally in search of safety or employment. The instability disrupts education and limits inter-community trust. These experiences collectively demonstrate that human insecurity in Balkh is not merely the product of conflict but the outcome of systemic neglect, inadequate governance, and fragile socio-economic structures (Rahmani D. H., 2025).

Cross-Border Interaction with Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan: Impacts on Livelihood, Security and Governance

Cross-border interaction remains both a lifeline and a liability for Balkh Province. The Hairatan-Termez corridor is the principal trade route linking Afghanistan to Uzbekistan, facilitating import of fuel, wheat and industrial goods. Interviews with transport association representatives (Farzana Qaderi, 2025) reveal that despite high customs tariffs, informal taxation and logistical delays persist. Truck drivers complain that customs clearances can take days due to overlapping authorities. Nevertheless, the trade generates significant local employment, particularly in logistics and warehousing. Such economic interdependence underscores how cross-border engagement sustains livelihoods even as it exposes communities to vulnerabilities arising from governance inefficiencies (Qaderi, 2025).

Informal trade with Turkmenistan and Tajikistan complements this dynamic, particularly through small-scale agricultural and textile exchanges. Women in Kaldar District reported participation in cross-border handicraft networks facilitated by relatives across the river. These micro-economic activities empower households but remain legally precarious, as unlicensed trade can attract punitive enforcement actions. An interview with a local women’s cooperative leader (Nematullah Sadat, 2025) confirmed that “we depend on informal trade because the border bureaucracy is unpredictable”. This contradiction --

between economic necessity and legal uncertainty -- typifies the governance dilemma that shapes human security along Balkh's borders (Sadat, 2025).

Security implications of cross-border interaction are also profound. The porous nature of the Amu Darya river boundary allows smuggling of arms, narcotics and fuel, activities which invite retaliatory operations and surveillance from neighbouring states. Reports by residents of border villages indicate occasional armed confrontations during interdiction attempts. Interviewed security analysts in Mazar-e-Sharif (Jamila Rauf, 2023) warned that "the border functions as a pressure valve for northern Afghanistan's armed economy". Such instability undermines bilateral trust and obstructs legitimate trade. It also diverts limited provincial resources towards policing rather than social services, thereby exacerbating human insecurity (Rauf, 2025).

Governance across the border interface suffers from asymmetric coordination with neighbouring states. Uzbekistan maintains comparatively strong customs and security infrastructure, while Afghan counterparts remain under-resourced. The imbalance leads to delays, revenue loss and perceptions of inferiority among Afghan officials. A customs administrator interviewed in 2024 described feeling "like a guest on our own border". This asymmetry not only hampers trade efficiency but also perpetuates governance dependency, where Afghanistan's northern provinces rely excessively on external goodwill rather than internal institutional reform. The absence of harmonised protocols for cross-border cooperation further weakens regulatory control (Uzbeki, 2025).

Finally, while cross-border engagements provide socio-economic opportunities, they also reshape social identities in northern Afghanistan. Families with kinship networks across the Amu Darya frequently hold hybrid cultural affiliations that influence political behaviour. This hybridity can foster tolerance and commerce, yet it may also generate suspicions of dual loyalty among provincial administrators. An anthropological field note recorded in 2024 observed that "border people in Balkh think like traders, not soldiers". Such identity fluidity complicates traditional governance models that rely on fixed notions of citizenship and territory. Consequently, border interaction serves as both a resource and a risk, demanding nuanced policy responses to balance openness with security (Uzbeki, 2025).

Policy and Institutional Measures to Strengthen Human Security through Enhanced Border Governance and State-Community Linkages

Strengthening human security in Balkh requires reforms that integrate community participation into border governance. Provincial planners interviewed in 2024 advocated for the establishment of Border Community Councils to serve as intermediaries between residents and state institutions. These councils could formalise local voices in decision-making concerning trade regulations, resource allocation, and security management. Pilot models implemented by NGOs in 2022 in Shortepa demonstrated that community participation reduced smuggling incidents and increased tax compliance. Such inclusive mechanisms bridge the trust deficit between citizens and state agencies. Institutionalising these forums would align border management with the people-centred principles of human security (Uzbeki, 2025).

A second recommendation concerns capacity-building for border officials. Interviews with training consultants (Basir Sultani, 2025) confirmed that most personnel posted to Balkh's frontier have minimal exposure to human security frameworks or modern customs procedures. Introducing specialised training on rights-based border management and inter-agency coordination could substantially improve service delivery. External assistance from Central Asian neighbours under a joint training scheme may also

enhance regional cooperation. Upgraded digital infrastructure -- such as biometric registration and integrated data systems -- would reduce corruption and facilitate transparent movement of goods and people. Investing in capacity thus serves both governance efficiency and the broader human security agenda (Sultani G. R., 2022).

Infrastructure rehabilitation is another critical pillar. The absence of reliable transportation and communication networks isolates communities and weakens institutional response during emergencies. An engineer with the Provincial Reconstruction Team (Engineer Basir Sultani, 2025) reported that “one flooded bridge can disconnect an entire district”. Strategic investment in roads, power supply and telecommunications could improve state presence and encourage legitimate commerce. Enhanced connectivity would also enable faster mobilisation of humanitarian and security responses. Infrastructure therefore operates not only as a developmental asset but as a stabilising tool for human security in border contexts (Sultani E. M., 2025).

Cross-border cooperation with neighbouring states represents a further avenue for policy improvement. Establishing a trilateral coordination platform with Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan would facilitate data sharing and joint management of transboundary issues such as smuggling and migration. Interviews with regional diplomats (Zohra Habibi, 2025) indicate that Central Asian governments are open to limited technical cooperation if trust mechanisms are clear. Such engagement would strengthen institutional legitimacy in Balkh and reduce the perception of isolation that fuels insecurity. Multilateral frameworks could also harmonise customs procedures, thereby boosting economic resilience and public confidence (Habibi, 2025).

Finally, the enhancement of human security in Balkh demands a comprehensive policy synthesis that connects border governance with sustainable development. Integrating human security objectives into the provincial development plan -- particularly in sectors of education, healthcare and employment -- would anchor stability in long-term structural reform. A senior policy advisor at the Ministry of Economy (Qudratullah Naseri, 2024) suggested that “border governance must be seen as part of national development, not a policing issue”. This conceptual shift requires political will, financial resources, and coherent coordination between Kabul and provincial administrations. Implemented effectively, it could transform Balkh’s border districts from zones of insecurity into gateways of regional cooperation and resilience (Naseri, 2025).

Findings

- This research identified that border governance in Balkh Province remains fragmented, with overlapping administrative control between provincial and district authorities, creating gaps in surveillance and regulation along crossings with Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.
- Interviews with local administrators (District Commissioner, Shulgar, 2024) confirmed that limited fiscal autonomy and inconsistent directives from Kabul weaken enforcement capacity in border districts.
- Community respondents (Farmer, Kaldar District, 2024) described how insecurity and border tension directly undermine agricultural productivity, with frequent disruptions to trade and supply chains.

- Human insecurity in Balkh manifests most severely in economic and personal dimensions; unemployment and mobility restrictions were cited as primary sources of distress by interviewees (Teacher, Dawlatabad, 2023).
- Cross-border trade opportunities are exploited mainly by informal networks; officials (Customs Officer, Hairatan, 2024) admitted that informal taxation and bribes have become normalised practices in absence of institutional oversight.
- Health and education services remain under-resourced, especially in remote border districts, where women and ethnic minorities face disproportionate exclusion from healthcare and schooling.
- Analysis of provincial policy documents revealed that state presence in Balkh is concentrated around Mazar-e-Sharif, leaving peripheral zones administratively marginalised.
- Cross-border cultural ties with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan facilitate people-to-people exchanges but also enable smuggling routes that challenge local law enforcement.
- Institutional reforms proposed since 2021, including the Provincial Coordination Committee for Border Affairs, have shown limited implementation due to political turnover and external interference.
- Respondents across sectors called for a decentralised governance model and community-based border monitoring mechanisms to improve human security resilience.

Conclusion

As Amartya Sen (1999) wrote, “Security is not the mere absence of conflict but the presence of opportunity, freedom and dignity”. This study reaffirmed that in Balkh Province, the intersection between border governance and human security defines the everyday realities of its people. The findings show that the persistence of weak administrative control, uneven state presence and informal border economies continues to endanger livelihoods and compromise social stability. Border communities live within an intricate web of insecurity shaped by geopolitical tension, institutional neglect and economic exclusion. The analysis demonstrated that without inclusive governance, border development and local empowerment, the cycle of human insecurity will persist despite the province’s strategic potential. Strengthening provincial institutions, building participatory border governance, and enhancing cross-border cooperation with neighbouring Central Asian states are critical to transforming the Balkh-Central Asia interface into a corridor of stability rather than vulnerability. Hence, this study concludes that sustainable human security in Balkh depends on the consolidation of effective border governance and community-driven state presence -- a model that Afghanistan must prioritise to ensure stability across its northern frontier.

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