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A brief history of international influence in Afghanistan

I. Introduction

Many observers and commentators were caught by surprise by the speed with which the Afghan national government was replaced by the Taliban, officially the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.[1] To many, the withdrawal of international security forces seemed to epitomise the poor communication planning failures that have plagued Kabul's backers since the US-led intervention following 2001.

Media coverage of haphazard evacuations and Afghans pleading for help in the face of the Taliban advance[2] reinforced the notion of the international community abandoning Afghanistan to its fate, as did evocative images of people flocking to the airport and in some cases falling to their deaths.[3] Critics of Western intervention in Afghanistan, notably the governments of Russia and China, were quick to point out Washington's inability to support its allies, drawing conclusions about the potential fate of Ukraine and Taiwan, respectively.[4] Many regional states, such as Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, have cautiously made overtures to Kabul's new rulers[5] despite major reservations about the possibility of their southern neighbour becoming a haven for regime opponents, while Pakistan has long been viewed as an influential backer of the erstwhile insurgents.[6]

But as the dust settles and the Taliban begin the transformation from insurgency to national government, questions abound about how Afghanistan will be governed and the nature of its relationship with the outside world. For decades, the country has been wracked by war and political violence as well as poverty, emigration and a lack of state institutions. These conflicts have a long legacy of international involvement and the political history of Afghanistan is closely linked with political decisions and agendas formulated outside of its borders. In examining what a potential future under the Taliban might look like, an examination of the history of foreign interests in the country might provide some interesting points of departure.

As recent months have shown, however, the trajectory of events in Afghanistan is difficult to predict and any analysis must factor in a great deal of potential variability and unknowns. Successive generations of leaders and authors have propagated various myths and cliches about Afghanistan, famously calling it the 'Graveyard of Empires'. While such portrayals are poetic and evocative, it behoves analysts and scholars to remember that Afghanistan is an incredibly diverse country whose complex social and political history defies simplistic narratives. This article sets out to outline some of the aspects of international involvement with Afghan affairs during the past decades, touching on ideological influence during the late kingdom, foreign intervention and support during the rule of the Soviet backed PDPA government, the tumultuous 1990s and finally the post-2001 efforts at nation-building. In doing so, it seeks to identify some key themes that have characterised international influence in the

1 Wesel, *Taliban surge in Afghanistan: EU and NATO in state of shock*, 2021.
2 Naar, *Young Afghan girl begs US soldiers for help, says 'Taliban coming for me'*, 2021.
3 Reuters, *Chaos, desperation at Kabul airport as Biden defends withdrawal from Afghanistan*, 2021.
4 EU vs DiSiNFO, *Exploiting the crisis in Afghanistan: Russian and Chinese media draw parallels with Ukraine and Taiwan*, 2021.
5 Reuters, *Afghan Taliban delegation visits Uzbekistan to talk security, power lines*, 2018.
6 Chatterjee Miller, *Pakistan's Support for the Taliban: What to Know*, 2021.

politics of Afghanistan rather than to be an exhaustive discussion about the role of international actors in the country.

II. The "decade of democracy"

Most discussions about modern Afghanistan's political history begin with the bookends of the various conflicts which have framed the perception of the country. Since many of the discussions about modern Afghanistan focus on the current conflict, and traumatic events such as the 1978 coup, the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, the fall of Kabul to the Taliban in 1996 or the 2001 terror attacks, this makes sense. But the period from 1964 to 1973 had a major impact on the evolution of the Afghan state, as well as many of the people who would later become political and military leaders. A series of liberal political reforms in 1963 set the stage for the rapid growth of political movements, particularly in places like Kabul University, which became notorious for its student activism. Particularly for young members of the Afghan middle class, this period allowed for a window to organise and explore new ideas from abroad. At the same time, international interest in Afghanistan, particularly on the part of the US and the USSR, provided young Afghan elites with opportunities to live and study abroad.[7]

Kabul University became a hotbed of political activism and by the mid-1960s students had coalesced into three major groups, each of which would have a major impact on the country's future trajectory. The first were the Soviet-inspired Marxists who formed the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), which would eventually go on to form the core of the Moscow backed government in Kabul from 1978 to 1992.[8] Less well known internationally but still a significant force in the country's left-wing politics was the Progressive Youth Organization (PYO), which took inspiration from the revolutionary Maoist ideology emanating from Cultural Revolution-era China.[9]

Both the PDPA and PYO, despite their mutual enmity and major doctrinal differences, shared a desire to address the perceived backwardness of many parts of Afghanistan, lamenting the rural-urban divide in particular. In part as a response to left-wing reform efforts and in part influenced by developments in the Middle East, where from 1967 onwards the Muslim Brotherhood become ever more prominent, a new force began to appear in Afghan politics: political Islam. While religion had long played an important role in Afghan society and political life, and Islamic teaching and featured prominently throughout South Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East, the late 1960s saw political Islam[10] gradually replace Arab nationalism as a major ideological current in the Middle East. At Kabul University, the most notable representative of this current was the Muslim Youth, which included figures such as Burhanuddin Rabbani and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and drew inspiration from writers such as Sayyid Qutb.

All three of these ideological currents borrowed heavily from abroad, and yet would imprint on the political landscape of Afghanistan. The fractious PDPA would go on to overthrow the government in 1978 and fatefully call on Soviet military assistance.[11] Many of the *mujahideen* leaders who would form the core of resistance to communist rule in Afghanistan were part of or influenced by the Muslim Youth. While Afghanistan's Maoists[12] would go on to play a less prominent role in the 1980s, they were influential ideologically and left their mark on groups like

[7] Ashraf Ghani, Zalmay Khalilzad, Hafizullah Amin each spent time in the US, while Hamid Karzai studied in India. Nur Mohammed Taraki was able to visit the Soviet Union on book tours.
[8] Ruttig, *Islamists, Leftists – and a Void in the Center*, 2006.
[9] Ibrahimi, *Ideology without Leadership*, 2012.
[10] Can also be called *Islamism*, might have a slightly different connotation, depending on the publication.
[11] See for example: Misdaq, *Afghanistan. Political Frailty and External Influence*, 2008.
[12] Also known as Shola'is after the Maoist publication "Shola-e Jawad" (eternal flame).

the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan, which continues to advocate for women's rights in Afghanistan.

While young Afghans at universities were beginning to form views of the world and politics informed by writers and ideologues abroad, it bears keeping in mind that this period of ideological foment was largely confined to elites in cities and although this era is known as the "decade of democracy", it would be a mistake to conclude that there was widespread participation in the political system – or that more socially liberal practices were taking root throughout the country. Equally, it would be misleading to conclude that rural Afghanistan remained completely unchanged. Disruption in agriculture, particularly due to intermittent droughts between 1962 and 1972, had a profound impact on many parts of the country – but the effects of this remain poorly understood at the international level.[13]

The "decade of democracy" came to an abrupt if ironic end in 1973 when Muhammed Daoud Khan overthrew King Zahir Shah and proclaimed Afghanistan a one-party republic. While a harsher legal regime forced many student movements to disband or go underground, their influence persisted and would again erupt to the surface – and shape Afghanistan's relations with the outside world in the decades to come.

III. Cold War-era proxy war

The overthrow of Muhammad Daoud Khan by the PDPA in what became known as the Zaur Revolution set the stage for an incipient civil war that shaped the future of Afghanistan. Divided among factions and with little support in many parts of the country, the PDPA was soon met with widespread resistance. Repressive policies which sought to secure the new regime's rule and remake large swathes of Afghan society sparked an insurgency that – coupled with factional struggles – put significant pressure on the government. By 1979 the PDPA leadership had repeatedly called on Moscow for military assistance to curb growing resistance to socialist rule and Soviet combat forces were deployed to the country in December to help maintain communist rule. The story of the decade-long Soviet intervention in Afghanistan is well known and a full analysis exceeds the scope of this article, but a few germane observations can be made.

First, set against the backdrop of Cold War geopolitics, the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan led to the involvement of an anti-Soviet coalition consisting of the US, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and, briefly, China in the conflict in Afghanistan. The goal was to frustrate Russian ambitions in Afghanistan by sponsoring an insurgency that undermined the PDPA's ability to govern the country and force Moscow to commit ever more resources to a drawn-out conflict.[14] This was achieved by providing insurgents, often referred to as mujahideen in deference to the notion of a religiously sanctioned struggle against the atheist USSR, and mainly operating from bases in Pakistan with an ever-increasing amount of funding and weapons to attack Soviet and PDPA targets in Afghanistan. Islamabad played a key role in training and funneling supplies and arms to the mujahideen, with the US and Saudi Arabia providing much of the funding. Iran, which had itself recently undergone a revolution, would also project some influence in Afghanistan, notably among the Shiite Hazara minority,[15] although far more limited in scope.

Second, the violence – which was particularly acute in rural areas, where the PDPA and their Soviet supporters sought to break support for the mujahideen – set in motion a mass migration into neighbouring countries.[16] Pakistan and Iran absorbed hundreds of

[13] Majaw, *Climate Change in South Asia*, 2020.
[14] Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 2004.
[15] Milani, *Iran's Policy Towards Afghanistan*, 2006.
[16] Maley, *The Afghanistan Wars*, 2009.

thousands of refugees escaping the fighting in Afghanistan, and cities such as Peshawar, Quetta and Mashad would swell as streams of refugees arrived. These populations would alter the demographics of their host countries, straining resources and requiring major humanitarian support. Particularly in Pakistan, they also provided recruitment pools for mujahideen organisations waging a consistent cross border insurgency. Many displaced people would spend years and even decades suspended in limbo, and some would eventually seek to leave the stasis of camps on the fringes of society to seek to migrate elsewhere – including Europe and the US.

Coverage of the conflict also had an ideological impact far beyond Afghanistan's borders. Propaganda efforts designed to portray the Soviet Union as an aggressor seeking to oppress the Afghan population's culture and religion resonated in many parts of the world. For many in the Arab world, the narrative of a religious community taking up arms to defend itself against a foreign invader fit well with political beliefs, and many young men volunteered to travel to Pakistan's border cities to take part in operations in the country.[17] While the battlefield impact of these Afghan Arabs – as these volunteers became known – was rather limited, combat experiences and the near-mythic accounts of the Afghan jihad would shape Islamic extremism for decades to come. Among the religiously inspired volunteers to be drawn to the conflict in Afghanistan was a young Osama Bin Laden, who would later go on to play a major role in shaping the fate of Afghanistan and much of Islamic world.[18]

Less prominent in the narrative of this period was the effect that the war and concomitant social upheaval had on minority groups, many of whom had been subordinated to decades of rule by the majority Pashtuns. The Hazara in particular, whose adherence to Shi'a Islam had long relegated them to the sidelines of the Afghan state, were able to forge a new ethno-nationalist consciousness during this period.[19]

An important insight from this period for the purposes of this discussion is that while Afghanistan became the scene of a Cold War proxy conflict, the influence of foreign states and their ideological impact predated the conflict. The socialist PDPA, while long influenced by Moscow, did not emerge spontaneously in 1978, nor did the Islamist ideology of the mujahideen. Rather, the conflict served as a vector to expand, modify and adapt key tenets.

The withdrawal of Soviet forces and political turmoil that accompanied the dissolution of the Soviet Union would eventually herald the end of the PDPA government in Afghanistan. However, contrary to expectation and in a marked contrast to events in 2021, the government in Kabul held out for years, only surrendering to the mujahideen only in 1992. This set the stage for the descent into a fragmented civil war, which characterised the country's political landscape the early 1990s.[20] The mujahideen opposition had developed and been encouraged to create as hostile an environment as possible, not to govern a country.

IV. Post-PDPA disintegration

The apparent end of the proxy conflict in Afghanistan coincided with a geopolitical seachange. In Central and Eastern Europe, the end of communist rule was sparking a fundamental rethinking of longstanding security and economic interests. In the Middle East, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and subsequent first Gulf War also drew attention away from Afghanistan. At the time it might have seemed

[17] Hassan, *Mobilization of Muslims for Jihad*, 2013.
[18] Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 2004.
[19] Canfield, *New Trends among the Hazaras*, 2004.
[20] This story is also well known, but Maley's discussion in The Afghanistan Wars is perhaps the most accessible overview form around that period: Maley, *The Afghanistan Wars*, 2009.

that Afghanistan's moment of geopolitical significance had passed, with Washington and Moscow both shifting their attention elsewhere.

But it would be a misleading to conclude that the end of the Soviet presence spelled an end to international involvement in Afghanistan. The newly emergent states of Central Asia, struggling to establish themselves in the wake of tumultuous independence, followed developments closely.[21] The involvement of Afghan factions in the Tajikistani Civil War form 1992 onwards proved particularly alarming, as did the eventual retreat of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) into Afghanistan.[22] For Pakistan, locked in its perpetual struggle with India and with well-established ties to Pashtun communities in southern Afghanistan, the objective of establishing a pliant government in Kabul remained consistent. In the early 1990s, the powerful intelligence agency of Pakistan, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), maintained a patron-client relationship with its favoured mujahideen leader, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, before later embracing the emergent Taliban as its faction of choice. Iran's Afghanistan policy remained more ambiguous, largely supporting the surviving Najibullah government until its collapse in 1992 as a check on the influence of its Sunni rivals Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

The history of the early 1990s is complicated and a full description also exceeds the scope of this article,[23] but the key insight is that internecine fighting and shifting alliances produced a fractured political landscape with local leaders ruling as de facto warlords. Under these conditions, all efforts for the country to recover from a decade of war or promote economic growth were frustrated. Kabul itself was divided between different factions of former mujahideen, and the capital's urban areas became the scene of pitched battles and shelling in a way that had not been the case during the Soviet occupation (the shifting locus of devastation related to fighting also helps to explain the attitudes of many Afghan elites to the 1980s and 1990s).

Later Taliban mythology would characterise the early 1990s as a lawless period, or as the era of the *Topakiyaan*[24] (which translates to "men with guns"), presenting the emergence of the eventual Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan as an effort to restore order following a chaotic interlude.

V. The origins of the Taliban

As the Taliban began to gain momentum from late 1994 onwards, they began to attract the attention of the Pakistani government. While many of the details that accompanied the creation of the movement are shrouded in mystery, it is clear that members of the Pakistani security and intelligence community began to see the Kandahar-based group as a means to achieve the longstanding objective of creating a pliant government in Kabul that would adhere to Islamabad's objectives: denying the Indian government influence on Pakistan's eastern borders, drawing on Islamist rather than Pashtun nationalist rhetoric for legitimacy and allowing for the creation of infrastructure linking Pakistan with Central Asia.[25]

Pakistani support arguably allowed the Taliban to tap into local conditions to form first a quasi-state, based around the old winter capital of Kandahar, and then seize Kabul – and by extension a claim to suzerainty over the country. While many in the international community may have initially welcomed the Taliban as a stabilising force following the tumultuous beginning to the 1990s, the harsh

[21] Olcott discusses this period from an Uzbek perspective: Olcott, *In the Whirlwind of Jihad*, 2012.
[22] A very good discussion of the incipient relationship between IMU leaders and the Taliban can be found here: Strick van Linschoten and Kueh, *An Enemy We Created*, 2012.
[23] Two books stand out in exploring these areas: Maley, *The Afghanistan Wars*, 2009; Rashid, *Taliban*, 2010.
[24] Strick van Linshoten and Kuehn, *The Taliban Reader*, 2018, 435, 117.
[25] Coll, *Directorate S*, 2018.

application of sharia law, violence against ethnic minorities and the poor treatment of women soon turned much of the international community against Afghanistan's new leaders. By 2001, only three governments had recognised the Islamic emirate: Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. There is some indication that China, growing ever more influential in both Pakistan and Central Asia in the 1990s, was interested in developing closer relations with Afghanistan's Taliban rulers, yet Beijing did not go so far as to establish official diplomatic ties with the country.

One of the more significant developments in the history of the Taliban government and later the international community was the presence of Al-Qaeda in the country. The near-mythic status that Afghanistan came to embody during the jihad against the Soviet Union in 1980s had attracted Islamist radicals from many parts of the Middle East, including a young Osama bin Laden. Although the impact of the "Afghan Arabs", as these international volunteers became known, was comparatively minor, the narrative importance of Islamic fighters taking it upon themselves to defend their co-religionists against an imperialist foe would come to have a major impact on radical Islamist ideology. Following his 1996 expulsion from Sudan, Bin Laden returned to Afghanistan to regroup Al-Qaeda and prepare for what would become the 9/11 terror attacks. Less well known internationally but of major regional significance was the IMU, which was also harboured by the Taliban authorities during this time.[26]

Following the 9/11 attacks, the attention of the international community again focused in on Afghanistan. A US-led international coalition supported by the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance effectively reversed the Taliban's efforts to consolidate the country and within weeks had toppled all but the last vestiges of the Islamic emirate. With their presence in Afghanistan all but destroyed, the last remnants of the Taliban, together with their erstwhile Al-Qaeda and IMU guests, retreated across the border into Pakistan's rugged northwestern frontier country. Following the whirlwind success of the military campaign against the Taliban, the international community set about the task of building a new state in Afghanistan that would eventually allow the country to become an effective part of the international community – with Hamid Karzai chosen to serve first as interim leader and then as the country's first duly elected president.

VI. Nation-building

However, after a promising start problems soon began to emerge. Corruption and mismanagement began to alienate the population, even as endemic poverty persisted and economic growth failed to materialise. Infighting soon began to set in, and the nascent Afghan state struggled to make its influence felt across the breadth of the country. Although unable to withstand the conventional firepower of foreign troops, the Taliban leadership was able to reconstitute itself in Pakistan, almost certainly with support from the ISI. Within a few years the Taliban were managing to sustain a prolonged insurgency, building on the legacy of the anti-Soviet jihad while appropriating new tactics, such as suicide bombings, from international Jihadists.

When hotly contested elections in 2014, the first democratic transition of power, failed to produce a clear governing mandate, the lead candidates Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah agreed to form the National Unity Government. Despite various efforts by the international community to foster development and growth in the country, Kabul remained largely dependent on foreign aid to sustain itself. Moreover, as the security situation continued to deteriorate, questions

[26] Strick van Linschoten and Kueh, *An Enemy We Created*, 2012.

about the Afghan national government's ability to fight off an insurgency became more acute. This was especially concerning as opposition to the continued presence of military forces in the country began to grow in many Western countries.

Operating from bases in Pakistan and increasingly from within Afghanistan, the Taliban insurgency became ever more potent. In the run up to the final withdrawal of US combat forces and the eventual collapse of the Afghan national government, it became a staple of reporting on Afghanistan to include maps of which districts were controlled by Kabul and which by the Taliban. While it is debatable to what extent they were able to control the Taliban, the Pakistani government remained influential with the Taliban and provided the insurgents with support. Initial talks between the US and Taliban broke down in 2011 and would not be picked up again until the Trump administration began negotiations with the Taliban representative office in Qatar. A major sticking point for the agreement hinged on the question of dialogue between the Taliban, styling itself as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, and the internationally recognised national government in Kabul.

The demise of the Afghan national government stands out in that many had predicted that the Taliban would become a major force in the politics of the country following the US withdrawal but had underestimated just how rapid the final campaign against the national government would be. The governments of Pakistan, Russia and China were quick to deepen relations with the likely new rulers of the country. The governments of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan followed suit despite harbouring major reservations about the possibility of Afghanistan becoming a safe haven for radicals form their own countries, with only the government of Tajikistan remaining hostile to the notion of a Taliban-led Afghanistan. Just weeks before the Taliban takeover, discussions about the future of Afghanistan featured prominently at an international conference in Tashkent titled "Central and South Asia: Regional Connectivity, Challenges and Opportunities."

The integration between Central and South Asia has long held pride of place among regional leaders, and the timing suggests that post-US withdrawal interest in the country is great. For their part, Afghanistan's new Taliban rulers certainly need to find financial and material support from abroad – particularly as an insurgency-centric model of taxing the population without spending on state services is no longer viable.[27] With the regime's former enemies blocking or severely reducing aid to the country endemic problems of poverty, hunger, and lack of basic services will become ever more acute.

Beyond the material aspects of international isolation, the Taliban will also be seeking ways to establish their Islamic Emirate on the international stage, remembering the lessons of lacking recognition in 1990s. Whether the historic and ideological ties with neighbouring states such as Pakistan, Iran, Tajikistan and China or the legacy of conflict with Russia and the US will play a role in this remains to be seen. What is clear is that the internationalised character of conflict in Afghanistan has thrown a long shadow and will likely continue to shape and constrain the country's politics going forward.

[27] Duncan and Clark, *Afghanistan's looming economic catastrophe*, 2021.

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