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BITTER HARVEST: A COMPARATIVE LOOK AT THE BRITISH AND AMERICAN PRESENCE IN AFGHANISTAN FROM THE GREAT GAME TO THE 2021 US WITHDRAWAL

Raluca Moldovan[*]

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Abstract

The present article is built on the premise that both the British Empire in the 19th century (during its rivalry with Russia, known as the Great Game) and the United States in the 20th century treated Afghanistan as a means to an end in their quest to fulfil their strategic interests, without much concern for the country's people, history and traditions, which ultimately contributed to their failure: Britain was forced to accept Afghanistan's independence in 1919 at the end of the third Anglo-Afghan war, while the US withdrew its troops in August 2021, putting an end to what proved to be an unwinnable war. The article's main body examines the British and American presence in Afghanistan through the lens of a historical comparison meant to highlight the similarities and differences in their approaches, while the conclusion contains a few lessons the US should learn from Afghanistan that might, ideally, inform its future interventionist strategies.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Taliban, United States, Britain, Great Game.

[*] Raluca Moldovan is associate professor in the Department of International Relations and German Studies of Babes-Bolyai University, where she teaches at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. She is an historian whose main research interests include Middle Eastern Studies, immigration studies and communication. Contact : raluca.moldovan@ubbcluj.ro.

1. Introduction. Afghanistan – the Graveyard of Empires?

In August 2021, the US completed the withdrawal of its armed forces from Afghanistan, announced by President Joe Biden a few months before, in April, thus putting an end to America's longest war. Images of chaos at Kabul Airport, featuring American troops being airlifted as the Taliban advanced, and local Afghans desperately clinging to the departing planes, risking their lives to escape, were heavily featured in mass media all around the world and inevitably brought to mind a similar moment that had occurred more than four decades ago in Saigon, when American personnel were being airlifted off the roof of the American Embassy in 1975, ahead of the advancing Vietcong. Needless to say, that was not America's finest moment – and neither was 2021. Both marked the end of conflicts initially depicted as "the good war," in which virtuous Americans were fighting evil communists or, later on, even more menacing terrorists. In both cases, the American public's support for the war waned as time wore on and there was no victory in sight; both marked defining geopolitical moments in which the US's military might was defeated by a significantly weaker enemy.[1] In 1975, as in 2021, probably the foremost question in everyone's mind was, "how had it come to this?" Much as President Biden and his team have rejected comparisons to Vietnam, they are unavoidable: in both instances, civil and military leaders misled the American public about a conflict with unclear aims and muddled strategies, fought on a geographic and cultural terrain in which they never quite found their footing.[2]

Dismissing America's fiasco in Afghanistan simply as an unwinnable war in the "graveyard of empires", a rugged land filled with people willing to fight to the death, is overly simplistic, even though the phrase, whose origins are unknown, has been featured heavily in news programmes lately, and even President Biden used it in his August 16, 2021

[1] "From Saigon to Kabul: What America's Afghan Fiasco Means for the World", *The Economist*, August 21, 2021 [https://www.economist.com/briefing/2021/08/21/from-saigon-to-kabul-what-americas-afghan-fiasco-means-for-the-world], accessed Nov. 4, 2021.
[2] *Ibidem*.

speech.[3] Even though Alexander the Great, Britain, the Soviet Union and the US all stumbled there at various moments in history, their losses in Afghanistan were not the only causes of their declining domination – and, in the case of the US, one could argue that its "imperial momentum" was actually lost in the aftermath of the 2003 Iraq invasion. Therefore, seeing Afghanistan as "the graveyard of empires" tells us little about why the US failed to "deliver a stable, unified and secure Afghanistan," as President Biden put it in his August 2021 remarks.[4] In order to find out a more pertinent answer, one has to look closely at the various changes in American strategy and goals over the past two decades, which is something the present article will do in a subsequent section.

Despite claiming, back in 2001, that America's goals in Afghanistan did not include nation-building, the US and its allies often acted as the midwives of a new state founded upon a new constitution adopted in 2004. The US was instrumental in building up a new Afghan army, one sadly and utterly unsuited for its main task (i.e., providing security guarantees to the civilian population, especially after 2014, when NATO forces ended their combat mission so as to ensure that the Taliban did not seize momentum to gain more territory),[5] because the chain of command often clashed with tribal and family loyalties. Pouring billions of dollars into rebuilding Afghanistan resulted in massive and endemic corruption with very few positive results to show[6] – and this considerably financial

[3] The White House, "Remarks by President Biden on Afghanistan," August 16, 2021, [https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/08/16/remarks-by-president-biden-on-afghanistan/], accessed Nov. 4, 2021. See also Sebastian Junger, "'A Vast Criminal Racket': Sebastian Junger on How the U.S. Corrupted Afghanistan," in *Vanity Fair*, August 31, 2021 [https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2021/08/a-vast-criminal-racket-sebastian-junger-on-how-the-us-corrupted-afghanistan], accessed Nov. 4, 2021, and Kevin Baker, "The Old Cliché About Afghanistan that Won't Die," in *Politico*, August 28, 2021 [https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/08/28/afghanistan-graveyard-britain-us-russia-506990], accessed Nov. 4, 2021.

[4] *Ibidem*.

[5] "Taliban Are Back – What Next for Afghanistan?," *BBC News*, August 30, 2021 [https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-49192495], accessed Nov. 4, 2021.

[6] As Sebastian Junger argued, "On paper the U.S. paid for a 300,000-man Afghan army, but the actual number was much smaller—and the difference, of course, was pocketed by Afghan officials. American policies were so contradictory, in fact, that many ordinary

investment was one of the reasons mentioned by President Biden to explain the complete withdrawal of US troops, whose continued presence in Afghanistan would have been exploited by Russia and China to further weaken America's global position.[7] In fact, China, which shares a narrow border with Afghanistan, has already signalled its interest in backing up the Taliban regime by hosting a Taliban delegation in Tianjin at the end of July 2021. One of China's Communist Party-run tabloids celebrated the US's withdrawal in August 2021 as "an omen of Taiwan's future," arguing that a conflict over the island would mean unthinkable human and financial costs that America could not afford to bear.[8] Iran and Russia, both relishing America's humiliation, have also shown a friendlier attitude toward the Taliban.[9]

Regardless of how catchy the phrase "the graveyard of empires" is, it fails to capture much of Afghanistan's actual history. If anything, the country has unfortunately found itself in the position of a victim of imperial ambitions, a roadkill of empires. Despite resisting Alexander the Great in 330 BC, he succeeding in breaking local resistance, founded what would become the city of Kandahar and pushed forward to India.[10] In his wake came the Seleucid Empire, Genghis Khan, Tamerlane, Babur, and Nadir Shah, all of whom conquered Afghanistan until the foundation of the modern state by Ahmad Shah Durrani in 1747. So did the Parthians, the Persians, the Arabs (who needed about 200 years to Islamicise the country) and the Turks – many of whom stayed for decades, if not centuries, despite the fact that Afghanistan is notoriously difficult to conquer because of its landlocked position along the main land route between Iran, Central Asia and India, the prevalence of tribalism in the area and the physical

Afghans concluded that the U.S. was secretly allied with the Taliban and just "pretending" to be at war." (*Art. cit.*).

[7] As President Biden put it in his August 2021 speech, "Our true strategic competitors—China and Russia—would love nothing more than the United States to continue to funnel billions of dollars in resources and attention into stabilising Afghanistan indefinitely."

[8] "From Saigon to Kabul", *The Economist.*

[9] *Ibidem*. Even Britain, the US's traditional ally, has expressed discontent that the US withdrawal was presented to them as a fait accompli.

[10] Seth G. Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires. America's War in Afghanistan*, New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 2009, pp. 60, 81. See also Carter Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan. A History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021, p. 51.

characteristics of its terrain.[11] Eventually, all the empires that reached Afghanistan found good reasons to move on and limit their costs and expectations, abandoning the country after subjecting it to delusions that suited their purpose at one point or another. Afghanistan's reputation as a sort of geopolitical quicksand for empires appears to have originated in the 19th century, after the first Anglo-Afghan War, when Britain started being involved in the so-called Great Game with Russia.[12] It is quite possible that Afghanistan's strategic geopolitical importance, just like that of other countries lying between more powerful neighbours (the example of Poland comes to mind) might have been exaggerated after the decline of the Spice Road in the 15th century brought on by the rise in sea travel between Asia and Europe and that the 19th century British-Russian rivalry could have been based on misreading each other's intentions at a time when London's foremost priority was protecting its strategic interests in India. Afghanistan was thus reduced to a buffer state separating the territories of the two rivals in the area, a status reinforced through a combination of diplomacy and coercion.[13] In 1907, Russia and Britain signed an agreement demarcating Afghanistan's borders to separate the country from the two empires.

The present article is built on a comparison between the British presence in Afghanistan in the 19th and 20th centuries and the American one throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, in order to show that both powers were driven solely by their strategic interests in the area, with little

[11] Akilesh Pillalamarri, "Why Is Afghanistan the 'Graveyard of Empires',?" in *The Diplomat*, June 30, 2017 [https://thediplomat.com/2017/06/why-is-afghanistan-the-graveyard-of-empires/], accessed Nov. 4, 2021.

[12] Baker, *art. cit*. as I will discuss further on, it was in 1842 that a retreating British-Indian army of 4700 soldiers and 12000 civilians was slaughtered almost to a man near the village of Gandamak. Far from being interred, Britain would triumph in the Second Anglo-Afghan War ended in 1880 and would go on to be, after World War I, the world's largest imperial power.

[13] Nasir A. Andisha, "Neutrality and Its Place in Afghanistan's Foreign Policy", in Srinjoy Bose, Nishank Motwani and William Maley (eds.), *Afghanistan – Challenges and Prospects*, London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2018, p. 241. As the author points out, "Afghanistan would be a buffer state where neither power would seek to exercise influence to the detriment of the other." (p. 245). See also Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 61 and Barnett R. Rubin, *Afghanistan. What Everyone Needs to Know*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2020, p. 1.

knowledge about the country's local conditions, history and customs. This ignorance promoted them to make decisions that sometimes misfired and had an overall negative impact on Afghanistan's development. Both Britain and the US treated Afghanistan as a means to an end by employing fairly similar strategies examined in the following sections. In addition, the paper also includes a section presenting a brief historical outline of Afghanistan's history, as well as a concluding part mainly focusing on the lessons to be learned from the US's Afghan debacle. While most of the Afghan and international actors that have contributed to the country's current troubles are gone, the problems they created are likely to endure into the foreseeable future.[14]

2. Afghanistan – brief historical outline

As any look at a map of Central Asia will show, Afghanistan is a landlocked country bordered by China, Pakistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Iran. Its lack of direct access to sea or international air space makes it vulnerable to and dependent on its neighbours. As such, in the words of former UN negotiator Lakhdar Brahimi, "Afghanistan cannot be peaceful if its neighbours do not want it to be peaceful," a statement that has been proven true time and time again.[15] This translates into the fact that every neighbour's preferred option would be a stable Afghanistan ruled by its friends and its worst, a stable Afghanistan ruled by its enemies. In between lies a scenario quite closely resembling the current de factor situation: an unstable Afghanistan where friends and enemies keep each other at bay.

Afghanistan was stable from the 1930s through most of the 1970s because there was an international consensus to support the Afghan government more or less as the British and Russians had agreed earlier in the century. During these decades Britain and then the United States had de facto agreements with the Soviet Union over non-interference in Afghanistan. From 1929 the same dynastic family, the Musahiban, ruled.

[14] Srinjoy Bose, William Maley, "Contextualising Afghanistan's Transitions. Influences and Challenges", in Bose, Motwani, Maley (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 1.
[15] Rubin, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

The government belonged to this one family, which placed limits on what was at stake in politics.[16]

Among Afghanistan's many ethnic groups, the Pashtuns (also spelled Pushtuns) have been the dominant political force starting with the mid-18th century, but even by the most generous estimates for a country that has never completed a population census, they represent about one third of the total population.[17] Other numerically significant ethnic groups include the Tadjiks (a term originally used to describe the Arab Muslim invaders who were far from being members of a single tribe), the Uzbeks (forming the majority population of the northern Afghan plains) and the Hazaras, who also represent the country's Twelver Shia minority.[18] The rest of the population are Sunni Muslims adhering to the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence and most Afghans are deeply religious. To this day, practically the entire Afghan society revolves around the idea of extended family or tribe/clan (known as *qaum*), which represents the primary political and social network.[19]

Afghanistan's long history of resisting invasion and devotion to Islam has a few important implications: it has defined what Afghan identity means and brought the people together, transcending rather than replacing tribe and ethnicity. But tribal identity was not always a source of cohesion, as it often led to intra-tribal conflict and warfare. For example, the Pashtun still adhere to Pashtunwali, their own code of behaviour that requires exacting vengeance against rivals, which explains why the Pashtun were often involved in conflicts with other tribes.[20]

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[16] *Ibidem*, p. 47.

[17] Jonathan L. Lee, *Afghanistan. A History from 1260 to the Present*, London: Reaktion Books, 2018, p. 13; Rubin, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

[18] Rubin, *op. cit*., p. 13. See also Malkasian, *op. cit.*, pp. 44-47.

[19] Malkasian, *op. cit*., p. 41. From an early age, family members are instilled with the *qaum*'s multiple identities, its histories, genealogies, its place and status in social hierarchies and ethno-cultural ties with tribal territory or a specific region, known as the *watan*. See also Rubin, *op. cit*., pp. 19, 172.

[20] Malkasian, *op. cit*., pp. 66-68; Christopher M. Wyatt, *Afghanistan and the Defence of Empire. Diplomacy and Strategy during the Great Game*, London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011, p. 5.

Historically speaking, Afghanistan has been known as the Highway of Conquest,[21] as it lay in the path of various invading peoples, from Persians to Mongols and from Arabs to Chinese, but it might as well have been called the Highway of Commerce, since it is located at the intersection of many ancient trans-Asian trade routes. The country never experienced direct rule by a European colonial power. As I have mentioned earlier, Afghanistan's modern history starts in 1747,[22] the year when a young ruler named Ahmad Shah from the Abdali (later, Durrani) tribe founded in independent kingdom in Kandahar, modelled after the absolutist Safavid Empire. The Durrani tribe, together with the Ghilzai, would rule the country in one form or another until 1978. Few other events in Afghanistan's history have been subject to more mythologising than the crowning of Ahmad Shah as king by a *Loya Jirga* (General National Assembly) of Pashtun, Uzbek and Hazara tribes; in reality, this quasi-democratic process for selecting a ruler might not have taken place at all (it is actually not mentioned anywhere in contemporary sources), since it is known that Pashtun tribes do not elect kings for the simple reason that they do not have a monarchical system.[23] The very term "modern Afghanistan" applied to this political entity is something of a misnomer, since Ahmad Shah had no specific name for his kingdom which at the time consisted of only three provinces, Kandahar, Farah and Helmand; the name "Afghanistan" first appears in the notes of British official Mountstuart Elphinstone in 1808-1809, used interchangeably with the "Kingdom of Cabool", although the kingdom's capital was Kandahar.[24] Ahmad Shah's

[21] Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012, p. 15.

[22] Certainly, the land known as Afghanistan has a rich and diverse history prior to 1747, but for reasons of brevity, retracing it here falls outside the scope of the present article. As Lee points out, "One reason for Afghan historians favouring 1747 as the foundation of modern Afghanistan is that it avoids referring back to the previous two-and-a-half centuries of the Saddozai–Safavid alliance. It also avoids the uncomfortable fact that prior to 1747 Kandahar, which Afghan monarchists would later promote as the dynastic and spiritual capital of Afghanistan, was for many decades an integral part of the Persian province of Khurasan and that the Abdalis were a Persianate (*i. e., Shia – my note*) tribe." (p. 66); Rubin, *op. cit*., p. 29.

[23] Lee, *op. cit*., pp. 110, 112.

[24] Lee, *op. cit*., p. 115; Rubin, *op. cit*., p. 9.

kingdom was fragile coalition of tribal, military and sectarian factions brought together for pragmatic necessity, which degenerated into internecine clan warfare soon after his death. His victories against various Indian rulers (most notably, at Panipat in 1761) weakened their hold on Northern India and allowed for the rise of a new and enduring entity, the British East India Company. Since the British presence in Afghanistan forms the object of the following section, I will not discuss it here and move instead to events following the moment when Afghanistan proclaimed its independence from the British Empire in 1919 during the reign of king Amanullah Khan, who also embarked on a programme of (largely failed) social and constitutional reforms modelled after the Young Turks and Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Adopting this model wholesale and trying to impose it in one decade, without accounting for the sharp differences between the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish state (where these reforms occurred gradually starting with the Tanzimat era in 1839), on the one hand, and Afghanistan, on the other, led to the king's forced abdication in 1929.[25] After declaring its independence (recognised in the 1921 Treaty of Rawalpindi after Afghanistan agreed to observe the older colonial boundaries), the financial subsidies that Britain had paid to Afghan rulers for half a century (the so-called "money from God") ceased and the country faced a severe financial crisis. This pattern would be repeated again in 1991, when the Soviet Union terminated its financial aid to Afghanistan, which led to the fall of president Najibullah's regime in 1992.[26]

The early years of the young independent Afghan kingdom were marked by a tense relationship with the Soviet Union. In 1925, Stalin sent the Red Army to occupy a region on the border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan and Amanullah Khan seriously considered declaring war on

[25] For more details on this issue, see Lee, *op. cit*., pp. 496-497. The failure of the reform movement was due in part to the naivety of its advocates, combined with their lack of understanding of the processes that led to Europe and Turkey's technological, intellectual and social revolution. This pattern of unfinished reform projects set the tone for successive generations of Afghan modernisers who fell victim to their own blind spots. See Mariam Ghani and Ashraf Ghani, *Afghanistan: A Lexicon, 100 Notes – 100 Thoughts*, Berlin: Hatlje Cantz, 2012, p. 13, and Rubin, *op. cit*., p. 34.

[26] Rubin, *op. cit*., p. 42.

the Soviet Union after the death of several Afghan soldiers.[27] The conflict was eventually settled through international arbitration, but the incident represented a stark warning of the consequences Afghanistan might face if it antagonised Moscow – a warning that would come to pass five decades later. Amanullah was succeeded by Nadir Shah, whose accession to the throne was welcomed by the Soviets.[28] The new ruler announced his intention to make Afghanistan a "progressive" state that would strictly adhere to Islamic doctrines, an intention formalised in the 1931 Constitution that declared Hanafi Sunnism the foundation of the state's legal system, an unprecedented degree of Islamisation until the era of the Taliban.[29] In 1934, Afghanistan joined the League of Nations and the US formally established diplomatic relations with Kabul, by opening a legation in the Afghan capital in 1942. Four years earlier, the American Inland Exploration Company (AIEC) had become interested in Afghanistan's natural resources, primarily oil, and secured a 75-year concession to exploit the country's mineral reserves, which was never implemented because of the lack of accessibility and infrastructure. In the wake of World War II, Afghanistan moved closer to the Third Reich, although the country maintained its neutrality during the conflict, as it had done during World War I.

After the war, the country's prime minister, Mohammad Daoud Khan, strengthened the country's ties with the Soviet Union, especially after Stalin's death in 1953. His premiership represents a watershed moment in Afghanistan's 20th century history, as he played a key role during many crucial events in his almost three decades in power. His preoccupation with the creation of Pashtunistan (a region reuniting all the Pashtun tribes on both sides of the Pakistani-Afghan border under Kabul's domination) led to a prolonged confrontation with Pakistan, as the Kabul refused to acknowledge the 1893 Durand Line as the official border between the two states. This conflict still marks the relationship between

[27] Lee, *op. cit.*, p. 481.
[28] *Ibidem*, p. 509.
[29] *Ibidem*, p. 513.

the two countries to this day.[30] This conflict also explains why Afghanistan was not invited to join CENTO and SEATO (Pakistan being a member of both organisations) and why Daoud, assuming that Britain and the US were siding with Pakistan, preferred to gravitate closer to Moscow. At this point, the US refused to take up Britain's mantle and be dragged into a new Great Game with the USSR over Afghanistan.

Daoud believed that closer ties with Moscow would minimise the risk of a Soviet intervention in Northern Afghanistan. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Afghanistan and the USSR signed a number of economic agreements by which Afghanistan would receive, among others, military and financial aid for massive infrastructure projects supervised by hundreds of Soviet and Warsaw Pact advisers. This increased Soviet presence inevitably led to the spread of Marxist-Leninist ideology and to the belief of Kremlin officials that they had won the Cold War in Afghanistan, despite the fact that Daoud still insisted that Afghanistan was a non-aligned nation. This rapprochement with the Soviet Union displeased many Afghans who opposed both Soviet atheism and communist ideology.

In 1964, Afghanistan adopted a new constitution which declared the state to be a constitutional monarchy, which was not the case in practice. It also provided for the existence of multiple political parties, among them the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), a Marxist-Leninist organisation whose leaders included Muhammad Taraki and Babrak Karmal, both emblematic figures in the country's slide toward communism.[31] The PDPA became engaged in a bitter rivalry with various Islamist parties inspired by the ideology of Sayyid Qutb and the Muslim Brotherhood.[32] In the late 1970s, many of the leaders of these parties

[30] *Ibidem*, pp. 553-555. In 1961, Daoud closed the frontier between Pakistan and Afghanistan, stating that it would agree to reopen it only when Pashtunistan obtained self-determination. See also Jones, *op. cit*., p. 86 and Rubin, *op. cit*., p. 36.

[31] Lee, *op. cit*., p. 564.

[32] For more details on this issue, see Raluca Moldovan, "The War on Terror from Reality to Idea. Why a Final Victory Will Remain Elusive", in Riku Flanagan (ed.), *Understanding the*

became leaders of the jihad against the Soviet Union. In 1973, Daoud orchestrated a coup d'état to depose his cousin, the king Zahir Shah, and proclaimed himself the president of the people's Republic of Afghanistan, suspending the constitution and the parliament.[33]

Afterwards, Doud embarked on an unrealistic project to nationalise all major industrial, commercial and financial assets and to eradicate the cultivation of the opium poppy. He also tried to convince the US and Western nations that Afghanistan remained a non-aligned country, hoping to gain some financial assistance from them, which would not be forthcoming. Despite the fact that Moscow was quick to recognise the new regime, the ties between the two became strained starting with the mid-1970s. despite renewing the 1931 Soviet-Afghan Neutrality and Non-Aggression Treaty, Moscow made it clear that, in its view, Afghanistan's northern provinces were included in the Soviet sphere of interest.[34] Daoud also antagonised the USSR through his attempts to minimise the power of the PDPA. In 1977, Daoud forced the adoption of a new constitution through a *loya jirga*, which outlawed all political parties with the exception of the National Revolutionary Party. For Brezhnev, this was the last straw and the Soviet leader decided that Daoud had to be deposed amidst growing popular demonstrations against the Afghan's president's regime. In 1978, with support from Moscow, Daoud was assassinated and the PDPA assumed power. This event marked the end of the Durrani monarchy.[35]

War on Terror. Perspectives, Challenges and Issues, New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2019, pp. 43-98.

[33] Rubin, *op. cit.,* p. 39.

[34] Lee, *op. cit*., p. 590.

[35] *Ibidem*, p. 595. Daoud's reign as prime minister and president of Afghanistan epitomized the monarchy's persistent refusal to relinquish its stranglehold on power, its inability to allow ordinary citizens of Afghanistan more than a token voice in the affairs of state and the denial of fundamental civil liberties. It is hardly surprising that the younger and better educated generation were forced to seek alternatives in militant ideologies, for it seemed that violent revolution, whether Communist or Islamist in nature, was the only way to establish a more just and equitable society. Tragically, the governments that succeeded the monarchy only offered more of the same, albeit dressed in different ideological clothing

The new governing coalition was an uneasy alliance between two PDPA factions, the Khalq (the dominant one) and the Parcham.[36] The PDPA adopted a Stalinist one-party state model and Mohammad Taraki assumed the presidency of the new Revolutionary Council, with Karmal, representing the Parcham, as his deputy. It was thus clear that the new regime in Kabul was nothing more than Moscow's puppet, despite Taraki's claims to the contrary. The US and other Western nations eventually granted diplomatic recognition to the new regime. The USSR sought to bind Afghanistan to it ever more closely through a series of treaties encompassing everything from cultural activities to military assistance and exploitation of natural resources. Taraki also inaugurated a reign of terror in Afghanistan during which as many as 50,000 people were killed or disappeared without a trace.[37] As a result, uprisings started to break out all across the country and, in February 1979, the US became unwittingly involved in the conflict when the US ambassador Adolphe Dubs was kidnapped and killed, which led to President Carter putting an end to all humanitarian aid to Afghanistan. Taraki himself was assassinated shortly thereafter in a coup d'état orchestrated by another key PDPA figure, Hafiz Allah Amin, who assumed the presidency and promptly tried to distance his government from the USSR and repair relations with the US and Pakistan.

Amin was concerned about the prospect of an Islamist takeover of the government and requested limited Soviet military support against the mujahidin, which provided Moscow with the justification it needed to send in the Red Army in December 1979 to accomplish a double goal: keep the Islamists at bay and depose Amin (who would soon be executed), replacing him with the Soviet loyalist Babrak Karmal. Karmal became president and justified the Soviet invasion by quoting article 51 of the UN Charter and the Afghan-Soviet Mutual Defence Treaty that allowed the Soviets to intervene if Afghanistan was threatened by "foreign aggression and intervention" (in this case, from the part of Pakistan and the US).[38] Like the British before

[36] Rubin, *op. cit*., p. 49.
[37] Lee, *op. cit*., p. 601.
[38] *Ibidem*, p. 605; Rubin, *op. cit*., p. 52.

them, the Soviets soon discovered that it was relatively easy to occupy Afghanistan and place a puppet in power, but maintaining that government in power was another matter altogether, especially since, just like the Anglo-Indian army of the first Anglo-Afghan war, the Soviet war machine was not equipped to fight a counterinsurgency. Karmal was far from having popular support and the Soviet intervention led to the outbreak of a full-scale civil war and to a proxy war between the USSR and the US. The Soviets, just like the US after 2001, found themselves forced to fight an unwinnable war on behalf of an unsustainable government. The intervention led to widespread instability and massive influx of millions of Afghan refugees, most of them living in Pakistan. The US, European and Arab countries refused to recognise Karmal's government.

Moreover, Washington saw the Soviet intervention as a major threat to Pakistan – a scenario that, if plausible, would have led to the Soviet occupation of Karachi, finally providing a warm-water port for the Soviet navy in the Indian Ocean and threatening American oil supplied flowing through the Persian Gulf.[39] In the end, this scenario provided a facile justification for arming the mujahidin and supporting Pakistani general Zia ul-Haq's military dictatorship, both secretly orchestrated by the CIA under the name Operation Cyclone. The CIA provided substantial support to mujahidin leaders such as Gulbuddin Hikmatyar and Jalaludin Haqqani, both of whom would end up later on the agency's terrorist lists.[40] Pakistan's security service, the ISI, channelled weapons and money to those mujahidin who were most sympathetic to Pakistani interests and used the conflict to expand its influence into Afghanistan's Pashtun belt by setting up training camps and bases. The US decision to support the mujahidin was a severe blow to Afghan royalists, who expected Washington to support Zahir Shah's return to the throne, something that ran contrary to Pakistani interests.

[39] This Warm Water port theory was developed by Jimmy Carter's national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski. See Jones, *op. cit*., p. 107. In the second half of the 19th century, Britain similarly believed that Russia also wanted to have access to a warm water port, especially in the Persian Gulf. (Wyatt, *op. cit*., p. 14).

[40] Jones, *op. cit*., p. 62.

By 1988, it was clear to Moscow that Afghanistan was a lost cause and Mikhail Gorbachev ordered the withdrawal of Soviet troops. In April 1988, the Pakistani and Afghan governments signed the Geneva accords, which formalised the phased withdrawal of Soviet forces and the principle of non-interference in each other's affairs. The mujahidin, who were not invited to the negotiations, unanimously rejected the Accords and doubled their efforts to topple president Najibullah, who had replaced Babrak Karmal. In February 1989, the mujahidin formed the Afghan Interim Government which brought together most Islamist factions. In 1992, when the Soviet financial aid dried up, president Najibullah finally agreed to resign and turn power over to the AIG. Thus, the country became the Islamic State of Afghanistan and all previous laws and the constitution were abrogated, since all judicial decisions would be based on the Hanafi code. Special religious courts were set up to uproot the last vestiges of communism, and strict censorship and segregation of the sexes, as well as the veiling of women, were imposed.[41]

The new regime was not unanimously accepted and the country descended into chaos and violence. Pakistan saw this as contrary to its interests and started looking for allies among the Pashtun mujahidin, a search that led them to Quetta, where a small group of Ghilzais from Kandahar had banded together under the name of Taliban (i.e., students). All of them were veterans of the anti-Soviet jihad, including their leader, Mullah Omar, who was in favour of distancing themselves from the new Afghan leaders who, in his view, had failed both the country and Islam. The roots of the Taliban go back to the mid-19th century madrasas founded in the Indian town of Deoband. The Deobandi ideology is, in many respects, similar to Saudi Arabia's Wahhabism, following a Salafist egalitarian model that sought to emulate the example of the prophet Mohammed and his first companions.[42] Some Deobandis also believed that they had a sacred right to wage jihad to protect Muslims no matter where they are. Many of these madrasas were financially bankrolled by Saudi

[41] Lee, *op. cit.*, p. 622.
[42] Jones, *op. cit.*, pp. 165, 169; Rubin, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

Arabia, as the kingdom had an interest in spreading Wahhabism all over the Muslim world.

Most Taliban had no secular education and were a product of isolated madrasas in Pakistan and India and were supported financially and militarily by Pakistan's ISI.[43] In November 1994, the Taliban occupied Kandahar and, within a matter of weeks, their ranks grew to tens of thousands of volunteers, as many tribal leaders pledged allegiance to them. In a matter of months, the Taliban secured most of southern Afghanistan from Kandahar to the outskirts of Kabul, threatening to overthrow president Rabbani's regime and install a "genuine" Islamic regime. In the spring of 1996, as the civil raged on, Mullah Omar convened an assembly (*shura*) that proclaimed him the Emir of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and, a few months later, in September, the Taliban entered Kabul almost unopposed, imposing a strict and radical Islamic law all over the country, which, in the absence of any doctrine about how the state should be run, became the country's supreme organising principle.[44] At first, a large portion of the population welcomes the restoration of law and order under the Taliban, despite their appalling human rights record.[45] The Taliban's ties with Al-Qaeda and their refusal to hand Osama bin Laden over to the US after the 9/11 attacks would lead to the 2001 American intervention, which will be discussed in the fourth section of the present article.

The emergence of Afghanistan as a nation state is quite remarkable, given its tumultuous history and the fact that it is, ultimately, the product of some fortuitous circumstances brought about by the fall of various empires and the rise of European influence in Central Asia. It was against this background that Ahmad Shah established his kingdom under the mark of instability caused by the pursuit of conquest at the expense of stable government.[46] The Durrani empire lacked political coherence and functional institutions and was undermined by numerous internal feuds

[43] Lee, *op. cit.*, p. 631, Rubin, *op. cit.*, p. 96.
[44] Rubin, *op. cit.*, p. 103.
[45] Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 187.
[46] Lee, *op. cit.*, p. 686.

which would be perpetuated throughout the rule of future dynasties. After the defeat of Napoleon, the British became involved in the Machiavellian world of Afghan tribal and dynastic politics and saw the opportunity of having a buffer state to deter a possible Russian invasion towards India, and played various Afghan rulers against one another with little understanding of local politics. This is exactly what the Soviets would do in the 1980s and, later, the US, after its 2001 intervention. In all three occasions, Afghanistan was reduced to the status of a rentier state and proved incapable or unwilling to sustain itself financially and militarily, while its citizens found themselves unwittingly entangled in events beyond their control and condemned to endless violence.[47] The collapse of Ashraf Ghani's government in August 2021 and the swift Taliban takeover bear witness to this fact.

According to Barnett Rubin, "The paradox of the Afghan state, however, is that it is both centralized and weak. The extreme centralization—virtually every decision or expenditure has to be referred back to Kabul—is a manifestation of its weakness. It does not have the resources to maintain a presence in all districts and villages. It has carried out a narrow range of functions: security, jus- tice, and very few public services. Especially when the state is weakened, as it has been by the past decades of war, local communities and power holders step in to fill the gaps."[48]

As Jonathan Lee points out, "The historic culture of reliance on foreign subsidies, loans and military aid meant that successive Afghan administrations have had little incentive to reform state institutions, and created a sense of dependency and entitlement. Furthermore, the subsidies indirectly supported entrenched tribal and religious self-interest, fuelled nepotism and sustained the patronage system and 'old boy' networks."[49] In Afghanistan, change has always been a top-down affair, imposed by a ruling elite that had little interest in garnering popular support or

[47] *Ibidem*, p. 691.
[48] Rubin, *op. cit*., p. 43.
[49] Lee, *op. cit*., p. 691.

governing by consensus. Thus, attempts to reform the country according to Western models sparked massive backlash, rebellion and the fall of governments, which meant a constant return to a rather backward status quo very resistant to change – something that the current Taliban regime has imposed through their radical Islamic mode of government. Undeniably, the resurgence of the Taliban has a lot to with the strength of their religious ideology. How long this model, enforced through fear and terror, will endure this time around, remains to be seen.

3. The British presence in Afghanistan: overview, interests, strategies

Britain's strategic interests in Central Asia go back three centuries, to the end of the 18th century, when the British East India Company gradually became a notable geopolitical player in the area, paving the way for the Empire's future domination over India. In fact, London's primary interest in the region, starting with the early 19th century, was always to safeguard its presence in India and, moreover, to prevent other great powers (especially Russia) from establishing a foothold close enough to India's borders so as to become a menace. Afghanistan entered Britain's sphere of interest soon after Ahmad Shah's accession to the throne, when he started a number of forays into Northern India during his campaigns against the rulers of Indian provinces located close to his kingdom's southern borders. Britain feared that Ahmad Shah and his successors might form an anti-British Muslim coalition with other regional rulers and engage in jihad against their presence on the Indian subcontinent.[50] From this point forward, and especially throughout the 19th century, Britain considered Afghanistan as part of its strategic sphere of interest and often interfered in its internal politics by supporting various candidates to the throne whom it considered favourably inclined to its objectives (regardless of whether these candidates had a legitimate claim or popular support), by providing

[50] *Ibidem*, p. 159. To prevent such an occurrence, in 1809 the British signed the Treaty of Amritsar by which they formally recognised Sikh sovereignty over Punjab, a territory that the Afghan Durranis claimed as their own.

financial support and by imposing various treaties that would ensure Afghanistan remained a solid anti-Russian buffer in Central Asia. All this was done with little knowledge or understanding about the country's history, tribal structure or customs.

The British diplomatic envoy to the Durrani court, on behalf of the East India Company, was Mountstuart Elphinstone, who arrived in Peshawar in February 1809, whose main mission was the persuade Shah Shuja al-Mulk not to permit French or Russian envoys to enter his kingdom.[51] The two parties signed a treaty by which the Shah agreed not to allow French or Russian missions to pass through Afghan territory in exchange for a vague (yet very typical) British promise of military and financial help should a French-Persian alliance attack Herat. The treaty did not lead to any tangible results, because the Shah was deposed by another pretender to the throne, Shah Mahmud, a few weeks after Elphinstone's departure.[52] The real gain of his mission, though, was a detailed survey of the politics, geography and trade of the region between the Indus and the Amu Darya (Oxus) rivers, the first such endeavour since the days of Marco Polo.[53] In his work, Elphinstone noted his astonishment at the Afghans' "extraordinary ignorance" of Britain – a sentiment no doubt reciprocated by the Afghans. This kind of attitude would remain typical of British-Afghan interactions throughout the 19th century, when the misguided assumptions and misunderstandings that the two parties held of each other would sometimes lead to bloodshed and violence, and would be replicated on a different scale during the two decades of US presence in the country.

[51] Shah Shuja hoped that, by receiving the diplomatic mission, he would secure British support against other claimants to his throne.

[52] Misjudging the level of legitimacy and popular support that Shah Shuja enjoyed, the British would try to restore him to the throne in 1839, but their involvement only threw the country deeper into inter-tribal civil war. This proves how little the British understood about the inner workings of Afghan politics.

[53] In 1815, Elphinstone published a heavily edited version of his mission entitled *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul*, which became a standard reference work for colonial officials and travellers and remained a cornerstone of British official perceptions of Afghanistan and its inhabitants. For more details about Elphinstone's work, see Lee, *op. cit*., pp. 173-174.

In the aftermath of Elphinstone's mission and the removal of the threat of a French invasion of India, Britain's policy towards Afghanistan was characterised, for about 2 decades, by indifference and non-interference, until 1830, when Lord Ellenborough, a firm believer in a direct Russian threat to British India (following the former's territorial gains after conflicts with Iran and the Ottoman Empire), was appointed President of the Board of Control of the committee overseeing the affairs of the East India Company.[54] Ellenborough, an armchair strategist with no personal experience of India or Afghanistan, was convinced that a Russian invasion of India was not only probable, but easy, and that Britain had to act pre-emptively in the Indus states (Kabul, Kandahar, and Herat) – an attitude shared by many of future British officials in charge of India policy, who took this assumption for granted and never question whether it had any basis in reality. Ellenborough's solution (which became known as the Ellenborough Doctrine) to this issue was to advocate for a more aggressive in promoting its interests in the region, primarily by increasing trade with the Central Asian states (to this end, a survey expedition was conducted in 1831 by three junior officers with a very superficial knowledge of Afghanistan and its region)[55] without taking into account the political and logistic complexities of trans-Asian commercial exchanges. His firm belief in the power of trade (including government subsidies and other incentives) to secure political influence was revisited, some 170 later, by president George W. Bush, who claimed that regime change in

[54] *Ibidem*, p. 190.

[55] Their reports were completed in 1831 and concluded that Russia indeed posed a military threat to India, to which their solution was to "reunify" Afghanistan and consolidate it "for Britain's own interests," which would secure the Empire "a lasting claim upon the gratitude of that people." This kind of arguments reflect how painfully naïve the British were about Afghanistan, its people and the situation on the ground. The expedition leader, Alexander Burnes, barely concealed his contempt for the Afghan ruler, whom he caricatured as an Oriental despot. (*Ibidem*, pp. 196, 199).

Afghanistan, followed by the implementation of free-market capitalism, would lead to democracy, freedom and good governance.[56]

The leader of the 1831 survey expedition, Alexander Burnes, provided additional detailed descriptions of the region and supported a treaty between Britain and the new Afghan ruler, Amir Dost Muhammad Khan, the founder of the Muhammadzai dynasty, without taking into account that the Amir's rule was threatened by a number of other claimants, including former king Shah Shuja. Britain would end up supporting the Shuja's restoration, despite its pledge to maintain neutrality and not become involved in Afghan dynastic struggles. This duplicitous policy would make Dost Mohammad Khan an enemy of Britain and have significant repercussions for the future of Anglo-Afghan relations.[57] The fractious relationship between London and Dost Muhammad Khan, as well as his attempts to seek outside allies (by making overtures to Russia) to secure his claim to the throne are among the causes leading to the first Anglo-Afghan war of 1839-1842, triggered by the signing of a Tripartite Treaty in 1838 between Britain and Ranjit Singh's Sikh kingdom, designed to leave Afghanistan (where Shah Shuja would be restored to the throne) a weak and divided kingdom politically dependent on Britain and the Sikhs. In October 1838, the British issued the Simla Declaration (essentially, a document justifying their intervention in Afghanistan with strong Orwellian Ministry of Truth undertones), stipulating, without a hint of irony, that Shah Shuja would be supported against "foreign interference" by a British army sent to secure the "independence and integrity of Afghanistan", without making any mention of Russia's presumed ambitions in Central Asia, which was the whole reason behind Britain's military presence there. The justifications for war mentioned in the Simla Declaration bear more than a passing resemblance to the similar statements meant to legitimise regime change made by the Soviets in 1979 and by the US in 2001. Then, too, the Afghan governments were deemed

[56] *Ibidem*, p. 192. The problem with Ellenborough's policy was that it bore little connection to the situation on the ground and implicitly committed Britain to military intervention if its interests were threatened by rulers who did not toe the line, even if they were treaty allies.
[57] *Ibidem*, p. 204.

untrustworthy by dint of their hostile policies, which allegedly posed a threat to the invading nation's national security. Both the Soviet Union and United States mistakenly believed that their choice for head of state was more popular (i.e., pliant) than the then incumbent and claimed that their military intervention was altruistic and would bring peace, prosperity, stability, security and good governance. They too promised to withdraw their forces as soon as the new government had established law and order. As was the case in the First Anglo Afghan War, all of these assumptions and assurances would prove to be fallacious. Nevertheless, at first, British victories in Southern Afghanistan created a sense of euphoria among Britain's political and military establishment who were convinced that the country had been pacified with minimal casualties.[58]

The British officials in Kabul soon found themselves at odds with the Shah's administration, which led to a widespread feeling of discontent even among the tribes that had not supported the restoration of the Saddozai dynasty. It soon became clear, among widespread opposition to the British presence, that the Shah was incapable of raising and training an army competent enough to maintain him in power, so they found themselves forced to subsidise his regiments and, when these proved incapable or unwilling to fight, British and Indian troops ended up fighting the Shah's battles for him, facing a prolonged occupation. This scenario would be repeated in astonishingly similar details in the final years of the US's and NATO's presence in Afghanistan.[59] The British presence also had

[58] *Ibidem*, pp. 227-228, 244. In April 1839, Shah Shuja entered Kabul triumphantly, to a visible lack of public enthusiasm, despite British reports to the contrary. The Shah then promptly proceeded to brutally execute anyone he deemed a threat to his rule, to the horror of British officials in Kabul.

[59] *Ibidem*, p. 266. The British eventually renounced the Tripartite Treaty, ceased their support for Shah Shuja, who was replaced by a regent, and signed a new treaty in January 1842, detailing the conditions for their withdrawal. It was during this retreat towards Jalalabad during extremely harsh winter conditions that almost the entire British army was massacred in the rough terrain of the Khyber Pass at the hands of rebel forces commanded by Akbar Khan, the son of Dost Muhammad Khan. As Jonathan Lee argues, "the political and military failures of the First Anglo-Afghan War had widespread repercussions in both India and Britain. First and foremost, Britain's imperial and military prestige suffered a major blow for even the most ardent imperial propagandists could not deny the campaign had been a

a detrimental effect on the Afghan economy, as they paid workers much higher wages than the market rate, which led to a labour shortage and a rise in inflation, because shopkeepers refused to sell their produce to locals who could not pay the same inflated prices as the British. More than a century later, a massive injection of US cash into the Afghan economy would lead to the same inflationary pressure and massive corruption, which only proves that, the more things change, the more they stay the same and the lessons of history are there to be ignored, not to be learned. For Britain, the lessons of the first Anglo-Afghan war would prove to be very bitter and, scrambling to find scapegoats for the failure of the military campaign, many officials in London blamed the Afghans for having the temerity to fight to defend their country, branding them as "a faithless enemy, stained by the foul crime of assassination and guilty of consummate treachery".[60] Britain's position as a great power also suffered a blow and, from then on, Russia would be much less concerned about continuing its expansion into Central Asia, assuming that Britain would not

disaster. Britain had been humiliated and its army had suffered its worst defeat since the American War of Independence. The fact that this defeat had come at the hands of poorly armed, factionalized, 'wild' and 'uncivilized' tribesmen rubbed even more salt into the wound. The heavy loss of life and the deaths of many senior officers also caused a crisis in India, and there were concerns that there were insufficient forces left to maintain security. To add to the woes, the cost of the war had plunged the East India Company into debt and a serious budget deficit. Politically the occupation was equally disastrous, for its outcome was exactly the opposite of what British officials had intended. Saddozai power, already in terminal decline, was broken and never again would a Saddozai challenge the descendants of Payinda Khan for control of Afghanistan. Dost Muhammad Khan, who Britain had damned as an unfriendly and treacherous ruler, was allowed to return to Afghanistan where he quickly regained the throne and established a dynasty that would last for the next 85 years." (p. 302). See also Wyatt, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

[60] J. A. Norris, *The First Afghan War 1838-1842*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967, pp. 387-388. Viscount Crankbook, the Secretary of State for India, during a speech given in the House of Lords on the eve of the second Anglo-Afghan War, was able to dismiss the events of the 1842 war as "unfortunate": "the sufferings sustained by our troops in the [First Afghan] war … did not happen because the country was too weak to maintain her rights and put down all opposition by the sword, but because we were unfortunate. We were unfortunate in our political negotiators; we were unfortunate in our generals." (See Hansard, "Afghanistan Expenses of Military Operations) – Resolution, December 9, 1878 [https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/lords/1878/dec/09/afghanistan-expenses-of-military], accessed Nov. 5, 2021).

risk again a future military intervention beyond the Khyber Pass. By the late 1860s, Russia's Central Asian frontier was very close to the Amu Darya. In Afghanistan, where Dost Muhammad Khan was restored to the throne, there was a widespread feeling of distrust against the British, which meant that no British envoys were allowed to reside in the country in the aftermath of the war, while the memory of the Khyber Pass massacre facilitated the perception that the Afghans were "primitive barbarians."

Dost Muhammad Khan attempted to exploit the Crimean War of 1853-1856 to his advantage, despite the fact that the conflict had no direct impact on Afghanistan and Central Asia as a whole. The war also revived London's fear of a Russian threat to India in the wake of the fall of the Sikh Empire and the British domination of all of Punjab. In 1855, Britain and Afghanistan signed a treaty according to which the British recognised Dost Muhammad Khan as king of Afghanistan; this was renewed two years later, under terms more favourable to the amir. Following his death, Afghanistan became the theatre of a civil war that lasted from 1863 to 1868, during which Russia started to push further towards Afghanistan's northern frontier, despite assuring Britain that it regarded the country as falling within its sphere of interest even though Russia's definition of Afghanistan (as consisting in the Pashtun tribal belt along the Afghan-Indian frontier) was quite different from the British understanding of the term as it appeared in the 1855 and 1857 treaties.[61] Renewed fears of a possible Russian invasion of India made London consider a more interventionist approach to Afghanistan, known as the Forward Policy, which in many ways rehashed the Ellenborough doctrine of the 1830s that had led to the first Anglo-Afghan war. In essence, this doctrine advocated for binding the Afghan ruler (whoever that may be) closer to British goals through financial and military aid. In the event that the amir became too close to Russia, Britain took it upon itself to act unilaterally to protest its strategic interests through means such as annexation, invasion and even dismemberment of the country.[62] This shows that Britain saw Afghanistan

[61] Lee, *op. cit*., p. 332.

[62] This notable change in British policy was enshrined in Sir Henry Rawlinson's "Memorandum on the frontiers of Afghanistan."

as a key geopolitical kingdom, but had little interest in the Afghan people themselves.

During the 1877-1878 conflict opposing several Eastern European states and Russia to the Ottoman Empire, British prime minister Benjamin Disraeli became concerned that Russia might open a second front against India by crossing Afghanistan's northern border, and so Britain renewed its demand for a permanent mission in Kabul and, possible, Herat and Kandahar too. The Afghan ruler Sher Ali Khan refused to do so, seeking instead a new treaty by which Britain committed itself to defeat Afghanistan from outside aggression (which London refused to do) and Britain found itself once more drawn into a war with Afghanistan. Since the Afghan army was no match for the British force, the Amir hoped to draw it further deeper into Afghanistan and overstretch its supply lines, while he made overtures to the Russian tsar for assistance; the latter refused to become involved and advised the Amir to negotiate a peace with Britain. The Afghan resistance quickly collapsed and the new amir, Yaqub Khan, offered to negotiate his surrender. The British imposed harsh conditions, including the installation of a permanent British resident in Kabul, backed by a sizeable military contingent, while the Amir received a small annual subsidy and the promise that British troops would be eventually withdrawn from the Afghan territory. All these arrangements were formalised in the 1879 Treaty of Gandamak.[63] Following the assassination of the British representative and his escort in September 1879, London had no choice but to send more troops into Kabul to depose Yaqub Khan and replace him with a more pliable puppet ruler. The retribution exacted by the British for the murder was swift and brutal.[64] In July 1880, the British endorsed Abd al-Rahman Khan's claim to the throne and the British representative proclaimed him Amir in absentia, before the ruler

[63] Rubin, *op. cit*., p. 31.

[64] Lord Lytton, the viceroy for India, considered the entire Afghan population responsible for the envoy's death, as it is shown in his correspondence: "The whole Afghan population is particeps criminis in a great national crime; and every Afghan brought to death by the avenging arm of the British Power, I shall regard as one scoundrel the less in a den of scoundrelism." See Brian Robson (ed.), *Roberts in India: The Military Papers of Field Marshal Lord Roberts 1976-1893*, Stroud: Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1993, pp. 119-121; Wyatt, *op. cit*., p. 9.

even arrived in Kabul. Throughout the two decades of Amir Abd al-Rahman Khan's reign, British officials always maintained it was Britain that had conferred legitimacy on the Amir since, by right of conquest, sovereignty belonged to the victors.[65] However, not all tribal leaders acknowledged Abd a-Rahman's accession to the throne and mounted an armed resistance against the British, who lost the famed battle of Maiwand on July 26, 1880, a victory that remains to this day one of the cornerstones of Afghan nationalism.[66] This was followed by the signing of the Lyall Agreement, the foundation of all Anglo-Afghan relations during the reign of Abd al-Rahman Khan.[67] During the following decade, Russia and Britain came several times to the brink of war, but each crisis was defused; nevertheless, London made it clear that any further Russian incursions into Afghan territory that threatened heart would be considered casus belli.[68]

Despite the Lyall Agreement, by 1888 there was notable discontent about the state of Anglo-Afghan affairs, many British voices arguing that maintaining Afghanistan as a buffer against a Russian invasion of India was a fool's errand, as the state was only held together by British financial and military aid, while the British were growing increasingly frustrated with the Iron Amir's (as he was called) erratic and tyrannical behaviour, yet they little choice but to support him, fearing that his deposition would lead to instability, civil war and a Russian intervention.[69] In 1893, Mortimer Durand, Foreign Secretary of India, arrived in Kabul to secure the Amir's agreement on the Afghan-India frontier. This issue was problematic because several tribes on the Indian side regarded the Amir as their ruler and paid tribute to him. In November 1893, the Amir signed the Durand Agreement, by which he accepted the Wakan-Pamir frontier and the creation of the joint commission to trace the Afghan-Indian border based

[65] Lee, *op. cit*., p. 379.

[66] Wyatt, *op. cit*., p. 1; Malkasian, *op. cit*., 48; Jones, *op. cit*., p. 84.

[67] According to the terms of the treaty, Britain renounced the claim to a permanent representative and promised military and financial aid. Britain was spared the humiliation of the first Anglo-Afghan war, but the campaign was not quite a resounding success. The intervention marked the end of the Forward Policy and cost Disraeli an election.

[68] Lee, *op. cit*., p. 390.

[69] Malkasian, *op. cit*., p. 49.

on a map brought by Durand.[70] Afghanistan knew two decades of relative stability under Abd al-Rahman Khan, which protected Britain's geopolitical interests by creating a buffer state to protect India, although at a great cost to the Afghan people because of the Amir's repressive regime, which Britain regarded as a "necessary evil." Britain financial aid turned Afghanistan into a rentier state with a very limited capacity for financial self-sufficiency.

At the start of the 20th century, Lord Curzon, the Viceroy of India, pushed for a new Anglo-Afghan treaty, which was seen as necessary considering that, in 1904, Britain expected Russia to win the war with Japan and thus be tempted to invade India. However, Japan eventually won the war and the threat to India was minimised. Even so, Britain sent a delegation to Kabul to negotiate a new treaty with Amir Habib Allah Khan, whose terms borrowed quite a lot from the Forward Policy. Yet, with the Russian threat gone, in 1905 the draft treaty was rejected by the Amir's council, as Britain demanded many concessions and offered very little in return. The treaty was eventually signed in March 1905 and, while a defeat for British diplomacy, marked Afghanistan's first step towards independence.[71] At the same time, without informing the Amir, Britain started negotiations with Russia aimed at a formal recognition of Afghanistan's neutrality and status as a buffer state. This convention was signed in 1907 and formalised the Persian, Afghan and Tibetan spheres of influence of the two powers. Russia accepted that Afghanistan was in the British sphere of influence, provided Britain did not invade the country, and in return Britain conceded Russia's right to equal trade and to communicate directly with Afghan officials on matters of a non-political

[70] Lee, *op. cit*., p. 400; Wyatt, *op. cit*., pp. 3, 17, Rubin, *op. cit*., p. 31; Jones, *op. cit*., p. 240. The Durand Agreement, however, would prove to be a major cause of disagreement in future Anglo-Afghan relations and, following Partition in 1947, in Afghan-Pakistan relations too. The emergence of Pashtun nationalism in the early twentieth century went hand-in-hand with a romantic vision of the unity of all Pashtun tribes and calls for a united homeland known as Pashtunistan. This led to the legality of the Durand Line being questioned by successive Afghan administrations.

[71] Lee, *op. cit*., p. 425. Despite several concessions, however, Britain continued to have a major say in Afghan foreign policy.

nature. This would have been something of a victory for the Amir, but yet again Britain had not bothered to inform the Amir about the negotiations or their outcome.[72] Habib Allah Khan considered the terms humiliating for Afghanistan and delayed a formal response to the treaty for nearly a year, while details of the convention's content leaked out and sparked a wave of anti-British sentiments. It was only in 1908 that the Amir sent a list of objections to the treaty which he considered a prelude to his country's dismemberment, but neither party was willing to make any changes to the document, so they agreed to abide by its terms despite the Amir's objections. At the same time, one of the Amir's advisers, Mahmud Tarzi, started promoting a new national identity centred on the notion of Afghaniyya (Afghanness), which he considered synonymous with Pashtunness; the monarchy adopted this idea and used it to justify the divine right to rule of the Durrani dynasty over the "land of the Afghans".[73]

Following the outbreak of the World War I, the Amir was pressured by his advisers to join the Central Powers, but he preferred maintaining a policy of neutrality, which came as a relief to Britain.[74] Joining Germany and declaring war on India would have meant Afghanistan running the serious risk of being partitioned between Britain and Russia if they won the war. The 1917 victory of Bolshevik Revolution in Russia created unease in both Afghanistan and India, but the civil war that broke out soon afterwards removed an immediate Russian threat to Afghanistan, although fears persisted of communist propaganda spreading into Kabul.

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[72] Lee, *op. cit*., p. 329; Wyatt, *op. cit*., p. 70; Rubin, *op. cit*., pp. 4, 31; Andisha, *art. cit*., p. 245.

[73] Lee, *op. cit*., p. 439. Tarzi defined national identity as consisting of four interrelated elements: religion (*din*), which he defined as the Hanafi school of Sunnism; patriotism (*daulat dosti*); the fatherland (*watan*); and the nation (*millat*), which combined all three of the other elements. The problem was, however, that there was no sense of national identity in Afghanistan, not in the European sense anyway, since tribal and religious leaders swore an oath of loyalty to the Amir, not to the state or the monarchy.

[74] Early on the war, both the Ottoman Empire and Germany sent envoys to Kabul to persuade the Amir to join their war effort, especially considering that the Ottoman sultan-caliph had declared jihad against the British. For more details about the Ottoman and German overtures, see Lee, *op. cit*., pp. 445-447 and Andisha, *art. cit*., p. 246.

In February 1919, the new Amir, Amanullah Khan, declared his intent to run Afghanistan as a fully independent nation and declared jihad against India, in order to punish Britain for failing to reward Afghanistan for its wartime neutrality.[75] Thus started the third Anglo-Afghan War, which was at the same time a war or independence and a jihad (since the Amir portrayed the war as a defence of Islam in India) – although the war could have been avoided altogether, since the Amir had already declared Afghan independence and Britain could do little about it.[76] The war lasted one month, with an armistice (the Treaty of Rawalpindi) being signed in August 1919, after the Afghan army was defeated twice.[77] For Afghanistan, the losses outweighed the gains. A second round of negotiations meant to secure a permanent settlement began in April 1920 in Mussoorie. The afghan side adopted an uncompromising stance, demanding an unequivocal and unconditional recognition of Afghanistan's independence, the right to open embassies in London and Delhi, and Afghan sovereignty over Waziristan and other tribal territories. The British negotiating team rejected these demands outright, and Tarzi, the leader of the Afghan delegation resorted to a naive attempt at political blackmail, by implying that Kabul was already negotiating with the Russia for better terms – without knowing that London and Moscow were already engaged in negotiations to renew the 1907 Convention.[78]

In September 1920, Tarzi began discussing with Russia in earnest and the Amir agreed to a draft treaty that promised considerable military and financial aid to Afghanistan in exchange for opening Soviet consulates in Kandahar and Ghazni. While Moscow decided whether the benefits of a treaty with Afghanistan outweighed the costs, the Amir supported a

[75] Andisha, *art. cit*., p. 247.

[76] Lee, *op. cit*., pp. 455, 500.

[77] Rubin, *op. cit*., p. 34; Jones, *op. cit*., p. 76.

[78] In September 1920, Tarzi began discussing with Russia in earnest and the Amir agreed to a draft treaty that promised considerable military and financial aid to Afghanistan in exchange for opening Soviet consulates in Kandahar and Ghazni. While Moscow decided whether the benefits of a treaty with Afghanistan outweighed the costs, the Amir supported a Muslim nationalist uprising in Russian Turkistan, which strained the relations between the two.

Muslim nationalist uprising in Russian Turkistan, which strained the relations between the two. Therefore, the Soviets set up the Central Committee of Young Afghan Revolutionaries designed to overthrow the Durrani monarchy and create a Soviet-style republic in Afghanistan. Faced with this prospect, Amanullah Khan was willing to renew discussions about an Anglo-Afghan treaty; Britain's precondition was that the Amir abrogate his treaty with Russia, which he instead signed in August 1921. Eventually, the treaty with Britain was also signed in November of that year.[79] The treaty's most important provision was Britain's recognition of Afghan independence under the rule of now king Amanullah; the Afghan government reaffirmed its acceptance of the Durand Line as the Anglo-Indian frontier. the Amir's annual subsidy (also known as "money from God") was not reinstated and Britain's undertaking to defend Afghanistan from unprovoked external aggression was not renewed. The outcome was that Afghanistan was weakened politically, militarily and financially. Perhaps most important of all, the Amir could no longer rely on Britain to defend Afghanistan from a Soviet invasion. The 1921 treaty put a formal end to Britain's century-old presence in Afghanistan, and from then on, the country embarked on a more or less difficult independent course, discussed in more detail in the previous section.

Afghanistan's difficult relationship with Britain would continue during the reign of Amanullah's successor, Nadir Shah, who worked hard to persuade London he had abandoned the latter's aggressive anti-British politics. During the course of his reign, Britain would covertly send him weapons to suppress a series of tribal uprisings.[80] In the run-up to World War II, Britain sought assurances from Kabul that it would remain neutral by offering limited military aid. Afghanistan's geopolitical situation became even more tenuous after February 1947, when Britain announced it would quit India and the last viceroy, Lord Mountbatten, made his subsequent declaration of Partition and the establishment of Pakistan. The British withdrawal caused great alarm in Kabul. For despite the

[79] Lee, *op. cit*., pp. 466-468.
[80] *Ibidem*, pp. 520, 522.

government's anti-British rhetoric and the country twice being invaded by British forces, Britain had restrained Russian territorial ambitions for a century. Britain had also propped up the dynasty through subsidies and armaments, demarcated Afghanistan's international frontiers and provided the government with international legitimacy. British withdrawal from India would leave no adjacent regional European power capable of counteracting the threat to Afghanistan posed by the USSR. Shah Zahir's solution was to turn to the new Western superpower, the United States of America, but in so doing Afghanistan inadvertently became involved into the Cold War.[81]

As can be seen from this expose, Britain's interest in Afghanistan in the early 19th century started based on a presumed Russian threat to India, which never actually materialised. Its colonial policy in Afghanistan was confused and oscillated between intervention and disengagement – but despite its muddled approach, inasmuch as it succeeded in warding off the Russian threat, one could argue that this policy was a success. This policy was increasingly influenced by assumptions about Britain's inherent cultural, religious and racial superiority over the Afghan tribes. In the name of its supreme strategic interest, rather than out of any interest in the welfare of the Afghan people, the Empire often became involved in internal Afghan politics and rarely for the better, playing kingmaker, imposing conditions and treaties, using a carrot and stick approach combining warfare and financial aid, very rarely taking into account local conditions or the aspirations of the country's own people, who were never consulted about these policies.[82] A fairly similar attitude would be replicated respects many decades later, during the American presence in the country, which is discussed in the following section.

[81] *Ibidem*, p. 539.
[82] Wyatt, *op. cit*., p. 20.

4. The US presence in Afghanistan – outline, interests, strategies

Until 2001, the US interests in Afghanistan had been minimal, and even its indirect involvement in the Soviet-Afghan war in the 1980s was more about damaging and weakening the USSR rather than any intrinsic American strategy concerning in the country itself.

The US first established diplomatic ties with Afghanistan soon after the end of World War I, but the country remained, for a long time, a backwater of American foreign policy.[83] In the 1950s, US had funded the damming of the Helmand and Arghandab rivers,[84] as well as the digging of irrigation canals in Kandahar in the 1960s as a means to counteract Soviet influence. President Eisenhower was the only White House leader to visit Afghanistan in 1959.[85] During the 1970s, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger also paid a visit to Kabul in 1974, when prime minister Daoud Khan was looking for international support to counter the influence of the PDPA.[86]

Afghanistan's strategic potential for US interests became evident after the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, when they saw the war as an opportunity to wear down the Soviet war machine.[87] President Carter authorised a covert operation (codenamed Operation Cyclone) to aid the mujahidin,[88] which was ramped up significantly after Ronald Reagan's election, when Afghanistan became a major policy initiative.[89] One of the main recipients of US aid (to the tune of $600 million in cash and weapons)

[83] The Legation in Kabul was only opened in 1942. See Lee, *op. cit*., p. 531.

[84] Lee, *op. cit*., pp. 546-547. In the same period, from the 1950s onwards, American teachers and educators taught English, rewrote the national curriculum and paid for the printing of textbooks and primers. American aid also helped construct Kabul University, Pan Am trained Afghan pilots for the national carrier, Aryana, while Boeing supplied the country's first jet airliners.

[85] Malkasian, *op. cit*., p. 89.

[86] Lee, *op. cit*., p. 587.

[87] Rubin, *op. cit*., p. 72.

[88] Jones, *op. cit*., p. 108.

[89] Flamboyant Texas Congressman Charlie Wilson was instrumental in securing a gradual and constant increase in the US military and financial aid for the mujahidin during the Reagan administration, as depicted in Mike Nichols's 2007 Film, *Charlie Wilson's War.* See also Malkasian, *op. cit*., pp. 136-137.

was Gubuldin Hikmatyar, later put on the Global Terrorist list by the State Department.[90] The total American spending in Afghanistan to support the mujahidin topped $1 billion, a sum matched dollar-for-dollar by Saudi Arabia. Pakistan became the conduit through which money and weapons were delivered to the Afghan fighters and the country would go on to play a major role in Afghan politics from this point forward. The CIA demanded only minimal accountability from the ISI (Pakistan's security service) and its Afghan clients for the expenditure of hundreds of millions of dollars in order to maintain plausible deniability. The Soviet-Afghan war upended the old balance between state, tribes and religion, tearing down structures painstakingly built over centuries, leaving the country destroyed and in chaos by the time the Soviet troops withdrew in 1989.[91] Having secured their objective (i.e., to destabilise the Soviet Union by drawing it into a protracted Vietnam-style conflict that bled its economy dry), the US did not see any reason to become involved in the reconstruction of Afghanistan once the conflict was over. Additionally, since Afghan president Rabbani and his prime minister, Hikmatyar, both declared their support for Saddam Hussein in the 1990 First Gulf War, the US and its Western allies showed little interest in Afghanistan's fate.[92] Therefore, as I have already shown, the country slid further into political chaos, instability and civil war which culminated with the Taliban victory in the second half of the 1990s. Around the same time, a terrorist organisation known as Al-Qaeda, led by Osama bin Laden, a veteran of the Soviet-Afghan conflict, found refuge in Afghanistan and established there a base from where to launch its future attacks on Western targets. Al-Qaeda's ties with Afghanistan and oppressive domestic policies turned Afghanistan into an international pariah whose regime was recognised only by Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and

[90] Lee, *op. cit*., p. 611. Among the many heads of state who shook hands with Hikmatyar during the 1980s were Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, who publicly declared that Hikmatyar and the other leaders of the Peshawar Islamist parties were the "moral equivalent" of America's Founding Fathers. In 2016, Hikmatyar signed an armistice with President Ghani, being removed him from the US terrorist list, an act of rehabilitation which outrages many afghanis.

[91] Malkasian, *op. cit*., p. 96. Section two of the present article discusses briefly the country's situation at the end of the war.

[92] Lee, *op. cit*., p. 627.

the United Arab Emirates.[93] In August 1998, following Al-Qaeda attacks on the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, the US first demanded that the Taliban leader Mullah Omar hand over bin Laden so that he could stand trial, which the former refused to do.[94] Therefore, the US supported a series of UN Security Council Resolutions that imposed travel and financial sanctions on the Taliban leadership, which Pakistan blatantly ignored. The Taliban regime's excesses had drawn the attention of the administration of President Bill Clinton, which never recognized the Taliban emirate as the government of Afghanistan and curtailed unofficial relations from 1997 onward.[95]

Following the 9/11 attacks on American soil, the US, alongside the forces of the international coalition,[96] invaded Afghanistan after the Taliban regime refused to hand over Osama bin Laden and, in a matter of months, brought about the fall of the Taliban regime. From the US perspective, the overthrow of the Taliban was meant to serve as a warning against other regime that might contemplate harbouring terrorists. In December 2001, a conference on Afghanistan's political future, from which the Taliban, as the defeated side, were excluded (which struck no one as odd), was convened in Bonn to decide on the country's future political organisation.[97] The Bonn process, as it came to be known, included a series of steps meant to endure the country's democratisation, including the convening of a *loya jirga* to decide on the composition of the transitional government (which would be

[93] Malkasian, *op. cit*., p. 141.
[94] Lee, *op. cit*., p. 644.
[95] Malkasian, *op. cit*., p. 149.
[96] After 9/11, Pakistan once more found itself as the beneficiary of US military and financial aid, as it emerged as the linchpin of Operation Enduring Freedom, opening up its airspace and ports to the international coalition forces. Pakistan's Janus policy, however, eventually backfired as the very jihadists the ISI had trained for operations in Indian-held Kashmir in the 1980s condemned Pakistani president Musharraf's support for the US military campaign, and mounted a series of terrorist attacks on government and officials inside Pakistan. See Lee, *op. cit*., p. 651.
[97] Malkasian, *op. cit*., p. 200. In hindsight, the Bush administration's decision to exclude the Taliban from the Bonn Process, which ran contrary to Churchill's advice about magnanimity in victory, would prove to be very costly.

headed by Hamid Karzai), the drafting of a new constitution and the organisation of national elections.

The US declared goal in Afghanistan, at least during the 2001-2002 period, when its military campaign was a massive success, was not nation-building (something that president George W. Bush explicitly spoke against during his campaign speeches),[98] but rather destroying Al-Qaeda's capacity to mount further attacks and eliminate the political regime that allowed it to operate,[99] capture Bin Laden and help the country transition to a democratic government,[100] all while using a light footprint approach advocated by then Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld.[101] These goals were only partially accomplished: Al-Qaeda was severely weakened, the Taliban regime was overthrown, the country embarked on a decidedly more secular direction, while Bin Laden's objective to draw America into a protracted involvement in Afghanistan (as the former had done with the Soviet Union) was accomplished.[102] On account of domestic pressures that showed the American public's fear of a new terrorist attack on American soil, the Bush administration, having secured a resounding victory over the

[98] Rubin, *op. cit*., p. 135.

[99] At this point, there was a widespread belief that the Taliban and Al-Qaeda were one and the same, a misperception that informed many of the US decisions in the early stages of the war. While it is true that the two groups shared an extremist religious ideology and a mutual support understanding, they pursued different goals and objectives. See Lee, *op. cit*., pp. 665, 681 and Craig Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers. A Secret History of the War*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021, p. 79. President Bush, in what would become known as the "doctrine of no distinction," made it clear that the US would not distinguish between terrorists and those who harboured them. (See also Sharifullah Dorani, *America in Afghanistan. Foreign Policy and Decision Making from Bush to Obama to Trump*, London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2019, p. 16).

[100] Malkasian, *op. cit*., p. 230.

[101] *Ibidem*, p. 234. Rumsfeld feared that a heavy footprint in Afghanistan would make its government heavily dependent on foreign money and troops and lead to an insurgency – which eventually proved to be correct. See also Rory Stewart, "The Last Days of Intervention. Afghanistan and the Delusions of Maximalism," in *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2021 [https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2021-10-0...ent=%7Bdate%28'YYYYMMdd'%29%7D&utm_term=promo-email-prospects], accessed Nov. 11, 2021.

[102] Malkasian, *op. cit*., p. 226; Rubin, *op. cit*., p. 129.

Taliban, decided to remain in the country, changing its main objective from counterterrorism to counterinsurgency and, later on, nation-building, when he announced a "freedom agenda" for the Middle East (Afghanistan included) to be the focus of US foreign policy "for decades to come".[103] Therefore, in 2002, president Bush called for a "Marshall Plan" for Afghanistan, thus reaffirming the US's intent to become involved in nation-building and the country's reconstruction – a process that would be extremely lengthy and costly. However, unlike the original Marsha Plan, the Afghan nation-building project went astray from the start and spun out of control as the war endured. Instead of bringing stability and peace, the US inadvertently built a corrupt and dysfunctional government that was almost entirely dependent on the US presence for its survival.[104] Like the entire campaign, this nation-building effort suffered from a muddles vision and lack of clear benchmarks. On 1 May 2003, Donald Rumsfeld declared during a news conference in Kabul that military operations were moving from major combat activity to a period of "stability and stabilization" and declared Afghanistan to be "secure."[105]

From 2002 to 2005, the US had the opportunity to support the implementation of new policies in Afghanistan and help the elected regime of Hamid Karzai, who was declared the winner of the 2004 president elections, despite widespread irregularities,[106] before the gradual Taliban

[103] Martin Indyk, "Order before Peace. Kissinger's Middle East Democracy and Its Lessons for Today," in *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2021 [https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2021-10-1...e&utm_content=20211015&utm_term=FA%20This%20Week%20-%20112017[, accessed Nov. 8, 2021.

[104] Whitlock, *op. cit*., p. 108. At the beginning, when Afghans most needed help, the Bush administration insisted on a miserly approach even as it pushed Afghanistan to build a democracy and national institutions from scratch. Later, the Obama administration overcompensated by flooding the country with more aid than it could possibly absorb, creating a new set of insolvable problems.

[105] Rumsfeld's press conference can be viewed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KrVV8jLkbuk.

[106] For more details on the problems of the 2004 election, see Lee, *op. cit*., pp. 661-663. The irregularities were augmented by the fact that the post-2001 electoral system was open to manipulation and the country had never had a formal census. Hamid Karzai was declared the winner, with 55.4% of the votes (Rubin, *op. cit*., p. 163).

resurgence that started in 2005-2006, after many former fighters started returning from Pakistan, where they had taken refuge to regroup and reorganise themselves into a hub under the name of Quetta Shura.[107] The 2006 Taliban offensive catalysed resistance to foreign occupation and transformed the nature of the conflict. The re-emergence of the Taliban drew the dynamic of resistance versus occupation to the fore. A religious-based call to fight infidel occupation spread. As it turned from a defeated movement into a battlefield victor, more Afghans could see the Taliban as fighting a foreign invader and deeply corrupt puppet government.[108] The Taliban offensive reaffirmed an ideal rooted in Afghanistan's history going back centuries to the tribal resistance against various invaders, which became a source of strength for them and a source of weakness for the government and, after 2006, US opportunities to put an end to the war narrowed. The role of Islam and resistance to occupation in motivating men to fight should not be underestimated, as both were part of Afghan identity. The Taliban's Islamic credentials and the fact that they were fighting occupiers made for a powerful recruitment device.[109] Islam, intertwined with Afghanistan's history of resistance to foreign intervention, enabled the Taliban to inspire their fighters better than tribalism or democracy helped a government tinged by Western sponsors to inspire its soldiers and police. Islam and Afghan identity offered the Taliban an edge, a point of sympathy, morale, and discipline that the government could not match and served as a point of friction between Westerners and the Afghan people. It would affect the ability of the Afghan government and its police and army to stand on their own after the US drawdown and in turn the very ability of the United States to extricate itself from Afghanistan.[110] By

[107] Rubin, *op. cit*., pp. 231, 233, 234, 240. It was at that point that the Taliban also started receiving weapons from China and Iran, both of which were transferred through Pakistan.
[108] Malkasian, *op. cit*., p. 441.
[109] Rubin, *op. cit*., p. 238, Whitlock, *op. cit*., p. 694.
[110] Malkasian, *op. cit*., pp. 451, 927, 976. In a series of interviews conducted on the ground, many Afghan respondents pointed out that, in confronting the Taliban, the Afghan military and police forces were not convinced that they were fighting for a just cause and that they served a puppet government. (See Robert Zaman and Abdul Hadi Khalid, "Trends of Radicalization among the Ranks of the Afghan National Police," Afghan Institute for

the time president Bush's second term ended in January 2009, his record in Afghanistan was mixed: his administration quickly overthrew the Taliban and oversaw the creation of a new regime led by Washington protégé Hamid Karzai, yet a policy of neglect after the start of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq paved the way for a Taliban resurgence that continued to gain momentum.[111]

In 2008, the US Congress, concerned about the lack of financial accountability for the funds destined for Afghanistan, created the Special Investigator General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR) to audit the activities of USAID, the US military other government agencies operating in Afghanistan. Its reports make for grim reading, as they draw attention to the staggering level of corruption infesting the Afghan society as a whole and detail how tens of millions of dollars were frittered away on partially completed projects or ones that were never even implemented for lack of basic accountability or supervision.[112] The entrenched kleptocratic practices of successive Kabul regimes made it difficult for the country to become financially self-sufficient and perpetuated a system of bribery that went all the way up to members of president Karzai's family.[113] The resuming of opium production (which diminished under the 1990s Taliban regime) was another factor that augmented that country's problems by channelling money into funding groups that destabilised the social and political order.

Strategic Studies, November 2015, pp. 15-17, 19-20 [https://www.acbar.org/upload/1471266047722.pdf], accessed Nov. 11, 2021.).

[111] Towards the end of Bush's second term, the US military operated on an unwritten conviction that the Taliban had to be completely defeated before the troops could be pulled out of Afghanistan.

[112] Lee, *op. cit*., p. 670.

[113] For example, his half-brother Ahmad Wali Karzai and Muhammad Zia Salehi, a close advisor. For more details about the latter, see Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR), "Corruption in Conflict: Lessons from the US Experience in Afghanistan," September 2016, pp. 43-44 [https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/sigar-16-58-ll.pdf], accessed Nov. 11, 2021. The collapse of Kabul Bank, which was effectively operating a massive Ponzi scheme, is another case in point. The U.S. counterinsurgency strategy rested on building a credible Afghan government, able to protect and deliver services to its citizens. However, corruption eroded not only the state's legitimacy, but its very capacity to function. (p. 45).

The 2016 SIGAR report, entitled "Corruption in Conflict: Lessons from the US Experience in Afghanistan," focused specifically on this issue that eventually became a massive hurdle preventing any meaningful progress in Afghanistan's democratisation process. Afghan officials themselves were aware of the problem, as the national security advisor, dr. Rangin Dadfar Spanta, argued in 2010: "corruption is not just a problem for the system of governance in Afghanistan; it is the system of governance."[114] Therefore, any significant attempt to limit or combat corruption in the country eventually failed, because the political leaders who were supposed to tackle the problems were the very same whose power relied on the structures that an anticorruption campaign should have dismantled, so they had every reason to block any and all such efforts.[115] Corruption was not a new phenomenon in Afghanistan, but it exploded after 2001, driven by continuing insecurity, weak systems of accountability, the drug trade, a large influx of money, and poor oversight of contracting and procurement related to the international presence.[116] Corruption was often cited as a key

[114] U.S. Embassy Kabul, "NSA Spanta," Kabul 5184 cable, October 2, 2010. See also Sarah Chayes, "Afghanistan's Corruption Was Made in America. How Self-Defeating Elites Failed in Both Countries," in *Foreign Affairs*, September 3, 2021 [https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-09-03/afghanistans-corruption-was-made-in-america], accessed Nov. 8, 2021. According to Chayes, many US officials "contended that petty corruption was so common that Afghans simply took it for granted and that high-level corruption was too politically charged to confront. To Afghans, the explanation was simpler. 'America must want the corruption'." Even more worrying, corruption was blatantly manifest during all Afghan presidential elections held after 2001: for example, in 2009, Washington sent John Kerry, the chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, to investigate election fraud during the presidential elections. Instead of calling for new elections, the official result was settled in a negotiation: Karzai still won, but with fewer votes than originally announced. As Chayes concluded, "That, ultimately, was the type of democracy that Americans cultivated in Afghanistan: one where the rules are rewritten on the fly by those who amass the most money and power and where elections are settled not at the ballot box but by those who already hold office."

[115] A 2007 study by the Afghan NGO Integrity Watch Afghanistan described a "bazaar economy" in which every position, favour, and service could be bought and sold. (IWA, "Afghans' Experience of Corruption," p. 10 [https://iwaweb.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/03-afghans_experience_of_corruption_2007.pdf], accessed Nov. 11, 2021).

[116] SIGAR, 2016, p. 6. The report identifies five main findings regarding corruption in Afghanistan and the role the US played in fuelling it: i) corruption undermined the U.S.

reason behind the popular support for the Taliban surge starting with the mid-2000s, as the people were becoming increasingly unhappy with governmental practices and processes, with corruption in the security sector having particularly tragic consequences.[117] The painstakingly slow work of building efficient governance and the rule of law was set aside in favour of security and immediate reconstruction needs, partly because of the Bush administration's early aversion to engaging in nation-building in Afghanistan, which explains why barely any anticorruption efforts were undertaken in the 2001-2008 period[118] and why priority was given to military alliances with corrupt powerbrokers who, once in government, expanded and strengthened their patronage networks.[119]

Obama's first term in office was marked by a self-described "realist" foreign policy, stripped of the moralistic tones with which his predecessor justified wars and destruction.[120] Aiming to secure a definitive victory over the Taliban, the president authorised a massive US military surge to push back against Taliban gains. The fact that Afghanistan's democratic

mission in Afghanistan by fuelling grievances against the Afghan government and channelling material support to the insurgency; ii) the United States contributed to the growth of corruption by injecting tens of billions of dollars into the Afghan economy, using flawed oversight and contracting practices, and partnering with malign powerbrokers; iii) the U.S. government was slow to recognize the magnitude of the problem, the role of corrupt patronage networks, the ways in which corruption threatened core U.S. goals, and that certain U.S. policies and practices exacerbated the problem; iv) even when the United States acknowledged corruption as a strategic threat, security and political goals consistently trumped strong anticorruption actions; v) where the United States sought to combat corruption, its efforts saw only limited success in the absence of sustained Afghan and U.S. political commitment. (p. 2).

[117] *Ibidem*, pp. 10-11. According to the report, three factors explain how U.S. money helped to fuel corruption in Afghanistan: the enormous influx of money relative to the size of the economy, weak oversight of contracting and procurement, and short timelines. (p. 19).

[118] Casey Michel, Paul Massaro, "America's Money Lost the Afghan War," in *Foreign Policy*, September 13, 2021 [https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/09/13/americas-money-lost-the-afghan-war/], accessed Nov. 8, 2021.

[119] Casey Michel, "America Enabled Afghanistan's Corruption for Years. The Taliban Knew It," NBC News, August 22, 2021 [https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/america-enabled-afghanistan-s-corruption-years-taliban-knew-it-ncna1277327], accessed Nov. 8, 2021.

[120] Lee, *op. cit*., p. 627.

credentials were very weak (a fact highlighted by the 2009 election debacle, when Hamid Karzai won a second term with 49.67% of the vote amid widespread accusations of electoral fraud) meant that the US would have to mount a significant counterinsurgency operation to counteract the Taliban's consistent gains and growing influence. Obama decided to send 30,000 additional reinforcements, stating that the US goals were to deny al-Qaeda a safe haven, reverse Taliban momentum against the government (especially in Helmand province), and strengthen the Afghan armed forces and government so they could secure Afghanistan on their own.[121] The US surge was, ultimately, unsuccessful in eliminating the Taliban, and Obama started considering the possibility of facilitating negotiations for an agreement between the Taliban and the Afghan government that could put an end to the violence and allow the Taliban to be a part of the governing process. To that end, the president supported a State Department plan to allow the Taliban to open a political office in Qatar in return for renouncing terrorism and resume negotiations with Karzai's regime.[122] In a June 2011 speech, Obama set December 31, 2014, as the deadline for ending the US and NATO combat mission in Afghanistan, after that date the mission being limited to training and counterterrorism within the framework of a bilateral agreement that the US hoped to conclude with the Karzai regime, defining what kind of operations the US military could undertake without Afghan permission and determine whether American troops who committed a crime in the country could be prosecuted under the Afghan legal system. However, Karzai refused signing the agreement, which led to

[121] Malkasian, *op. cit*., p. 670. The US plan to build up and train an Afghan National Army ultimately proved to be a resounding failure: from its inception, the ANA was plagued with large-scale desertions, absenteeism and nepotism, while many of its recruits remained loyal to their militia commanders or *qaum* rather than the state. Thousands of rifles and other major items of military equipment supplied by the US went missing or fell into the hands of insurgents, and investigations revealed that tens of thousands of individuals listed on army payrolls were either non-existent or absent without leave. See also Lee, *op. cit.,* p. 666.

[122] Malkasian, *op. cit*., p. 872, Rubin, *op. cit*., p. 281. In the final days of the Obama administration, the US State Department conducted a few rounds of negotiations with the Taliban in Doha, without any notable success. See also Whitlock, *op. cit*., p. 704.

quite a bit of tension in the US-Afghan relationship.[123] Karzai feared that his domestic support would diminish if he allowed US troops to remain stationed on Afghan soil, given that, historically speaking, Afghan rulers who signed such agreements were vilified and, sometimes, assassinated.

The Taliban continued their gains in 2015 and 2016, even though the US did not completely go through with the announced troop withdrawal, given the dire situation on the ground and, for the next two years, the military tried to keep terrorism and violence at bay, with only modest success, until the end of Obama's second term. After Donald Trump was inaugurated as president in January 2017, the new administration began a review of its Afghanistan and Pakistan strategy and determined that the potential of terrorism from Afghanistan was too great to take any risks, thus the realistic choice was to invest enough forces to suppress terrorism threats. To this end, Trump announced a new strategy in August 2017, promising greater pressure on Pakistan and stressing that there would be no deadline for troop withdrawal, but rather a conditions-based approach, marking a reversal from the Obama era deadline-based strategy.[124] During the same speech, the US president emphasised that his instinct was to withdraw all troops from Afghanistan, something which his military advisers considered too risky, considering that, by 2018, the ranks of the Taliban had swelled to about 60,000 fighters.[125]

The new strategy also prioritised peace talks with the Taliban to seek a political settlement (despite Trump's initial claim that the negotiating process should be "Afghan-led and Afghan-owned"[126]),

[123] The agreement would be signed by Karzai's successor, Ashraf Ghani, after the 2015 elections. The United States had two controversial demands. First, under very select circumstances, night raids and other missions to detain Afghans would continue. Obama saw no reason to leave troops in Afghanistan without freedom to conduct counterterrorism operations. Second, US troops would have immunity from prosecution in an Afghan court for any crimes committed on Afghan soil. (Malkasian, *op. cit*., p. 967; Rubin, *op. cit*., pp. 163-164).

[124] Malkasian, *op. cit*., p. 1140; Rubin, *op. cit*., p. 271.

[125] Whitlock, *op. cit*., p. 632.

[126] Rubin, *op. cit*., p. 288. U.S. officials had said for a decade that brokering a political settlement between the Afghan government and the insurgents was the only feasible way to

especially considering that, starting with 2017-2018, a new radical group made its violent presence known in Afghanistan: ISIS-K, the Islamic State in Khorasan province, an offshoot of the original ISIS formed in Iraq in 2013-2014.[127] The previous administrations had made only half-hearted attempts to find a negotiated solution: they had squandered multiple opportunities to reach out to the Taliban when the US held a much bigger leverage, deferring to the afghan government and letting it paralyse the peace process by adopting a "divide and conquer" approach.[128]

In February 2018, the Taliban sent an open letter to the American people, signalling their willingness to enter peace talks with the US, as long as the Afghan government was excluded. The negotiation process would be long and marked by several changes in direction,[129] given Trump's erratic and unpredictable decision-making process: for instance, in December 2018, after the Republic Party lost the mid-term elections, without any prior warning, he ordered all forces in Afghanistan, including those involved in counterterrorism operations, pulled out within weeks, which was both dangerous and unfeasible if the US still wanted to secure a settlement with the Taliban. The US chief negotiator, Zalmay Khalilzad, envisioned a US-Taliban agreement with four main components: first, a Taliban guarantee that Afghanistan would not be used by any group or individual to attack another country; second, a timeline for a complete US

end the war. They knew a lasting military defeat of the Taliban was highly unlikely. Unlike al-Qaeda, whose shrinking membership consisted of a few Arabs and other foreign fighters, the Taliban was a Pashtun-led mass movement that represented a significant portion of the Afghan population and continued to gain strength. (Whitlock, *op. cit*., p. 687).

[127] Malkasian, *op. cit*., p. 1153; Rubin, *op. cit*., p. 250. By early 2016, US estimates showed that ISIS-K had between 1000 and 3000 fighters, mostly former Taliban members. (Whitlock, *op. cit*., p. 620). For a complete timeline of ISIS-K and its involvement in Afghanistan and Pakistan, see Antonio Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan. Afghanistan, Pakistan and the New Central Asian Jihad*, London: Hurst&Company, 2018.

[128] Whitlock, *op. cit*., pp. 688-689.

[129] In September 2019, Trump suspended the negotiations via tweet because he was facing serious backlash from both sides of the aisle over his proposal to host president Ghani and the Taliban leader at Camp David to sign the draft agreement decided upon up until that point (Rubin, *op. cit*., p. 257; Whitlock, *op. cit*., p. 710). During a surprise Thanksgiving visit to Bagram airbase in November 2019, Trump announced that negotiations would be resumed, based on an ambiguous claim that the Taliban had agreed to a ceasefire.

withdrawal; third, a Taliban promise to reach a political settlement with the government; fourth, a general ceasefire, to which the Taliban never formally agreed.[130] The agreement between the US and the Taliban, despite having various grey areas, contingencies and unresolved issues, was finally signed in Doha in February 2020 and it contained the latter's commitment to reducing violence, preventing al-Qaeda from using Afghan territory to mount terrorist attacks, training the fundraising. The US pledge to withdraw its troops according to the 14-month timeline. The agreement also included the provision of intra-Afghan negotiations including the Afghan government, which started in Doha in September 2020.

Given that Donald Trump lost his re-election bid in November 2020, it fell onto his successor, Joe Biden (who had long been viscerally opposed to the war), the implement the provisions of the accord and put an end to America's longest war by bringing all the troops home.[131] As soon as he became president in January 2021, Biden faced the same conundrum that had bedevilled Bush, Obama and Trump: how to end an unwinnable war?[132] In April 2021, the US president gave a speech in which he announced his decision to withdraw all US troops from Afghanistan by September 11, 2021. Unlike his predecessors, Biden gave a sobering assessment of two decades of warfare. He did not try to frame the outcome as a victory. Instead, he said the United States had achieved its original objective long ago by destroying al-Qaeda's stronghold in Afghanistan, suggesting that U.S. troops should have left after they killed Osama bin Laden in May 2011. He also emphasised the fact that Washington's rationale for staying in Afghanistan had become increasingly muddled, which is evident if one looks at the numerous changes in direction and objectives over the past two decades.[133] Since the US could no longer answer the question "what conditions must be met for us to depart?," he considered that it was time for America's longest war to come to an end, since there would never actually be an optimal moment to leave.

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[130] Malkasian, *op. cit*., p. 1209.
[131] *Ibidem*, p. 1258.
[132] Whitlock, *op. cit*., p. 714.
[133] Whitstock, *op. cit*., p. 716.

As I have shown in the present section, during the two decades of the Afghan war, the US policy towards Afghanistan was primarily guided by its own strategic and foreign policy interests, and went through a number of significant changes and turning points, from a policy of relative abandonment prior to 9/11[134] to a full-scale military intervention; from a counterterrorism to a counter-insurgency strategy; from rooting out terrorism to containing it; from treating the Taliban as terrorists and consequently the enemy to declaring them as non-terrorists and thus not the enemy; from the goal of defeating the Taliban to degrading them; from seeing Afghanistan as having compelling relevance to US national security interests to seeing it as having minimal importance; and from intending to spend as long as it took to secure a democratic and strong Afghanistan to the objective of establishing a good enough state so that the US could have a quick exit.[135]

5. Conclusions

There is one main red thread running through the comparative account of the British and American presence in Afghanistan: clearly, both countries were driven by their own self-interest and treated Afghanistan as a means to an end, without having any deep understanding of the country's people, history and traditions, and just tried to transform it into whatever suited their purpose at one point or another. Britain's Afghan Great Game ended at the start of the 20th century and, ever since, the country has been a rather marginal player in the region, especially after

[134] Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 154. The US Embassy in Kabul was closed down in 1989 and would only reopen in December 2001.

[135] Dorani, *op. cit.*, p. 7. The main turning points in this decades-long strategy are as follows: the first occurred immediately after 9/11, when president Bush launched the Global War on Terror with the Afghan invasion; the second happened in 2002 when, after the fall of the Taliban, president Bush decided to start employing a counterterrorism strategy; the third took place in 2009, when president Obama decided to deploy an additional 30,000 troops to ramp up counterinsurgency measures, while the fourth was marked by the decision to withdraw the very same troops by the end of 2014. The last two turning points were in 2016, when Obama announced some changes in the US's Afghan strategy to delay America's exit, and in 2017, when Trump presented his new South Asia strategy.

India gained its independence in 1947. The US presence in Afghanistan, however, is a different story altogether: even though much shorter than Britain's, it will continue to cast a very long shadow for the foreseeable future, and discussions of America's "Afghan fiasco" will linger in world media and academic circles for some time still. The present section will therefore focus on a few lessons that the US should learn from Afghanistan, derived from the flaws in its strategy that led to this entirely unsurprising outcome, despite its swift initial victory in 2001. As time wore on, it became increasingly clear that, as the old adage goes, the US succeeded in snatching defeat from the jaws of victory.

i) The US government's strategy for Afghanistan was never coherent. Suffering from a chronic misalignment of ends, means, and ways, and successive Washington administrations struggled to formulate firm, clear goals, the end result being a continuous state of muddling through with little effective progress. At various points, the U.S. government hoped to eliminate al-Qaeda, decimate the Taliban movement that hosted it, deny all terrorist groups a safe haven in Afghanistan, build Afghan security forces so they could deny terrorists a safe haven in the future, and help the civilian government become legitimate and capable enough to win the trust of Afghans. Each goal, once accomplished, was thought to move the U.S. government one step closer to being able to depart.[136] This very insistence on the existence of a "clearly defined mission" and an "exit strategy", despite much evidence to the contrary, proved very damaging in the end.[137] The two main agencies involved (the State Department and the Department of Defence) lacked the necessary mindset, resources and expertise to carry out the reconstruction of Afghanistan.[138] The US's attempt to return to a lighter footprint in Afghanistan in 2014 came too late: by that time,

[136] Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR), "What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction," August 2021, pp. 1, 14 [https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-21-46-LL.pdf], accessed Nov. 11, 2021.

[137] Stewart, *art. cit*. As the author argues, in Afghanistan, "From the very beginning, the international plans were surreally detached from the local reality."

[138] SIGAR, 2021, p. viii. Time and time again, high-ranking officials drew attention to the lack of a coherent long-term strategy, among them Army Gen. Dan McNeill, or British Gen. David Richards, who led the US and NATO forces from 2006 to 2007. (See Whitlock, *op. cit*., p. 20).

immense damage had been done and the Taliban resurge was gaining ground against an Afghan army entirely reliant on expensive and sophisticated US technology and populated by many corrupt gangster capitalists whose wealth was fed based on military contracts.[139]

ii) Washington also consistently underestimated the amount of time needed to rebuild Afghanistan and created deeply unrealistic timelines, prioritising short-term goals whose only result was quick cash spending, thinking that decisions made in the US could change the complex situation on the ground, which was often ignored. Inevitably, this led to generalised corruption and inefficient measures. In turn, the US was naïve, ignorant, unclear, lost, arrogant and parsimonious in its dealings with Afghanistan.[140]

iii) A large part of the institutions and infrastructure projects the US built were unsustainable, as billions of dollars were wasted since US officials were often judged by the number of projects completed and money spent, not long-term utility and sustainability, thus leading to a plethora of Potemkin villages built to please the American sponsors.[141] By 2010, U.S. reconstruction spending was equivalent to more than 100 percent of Afghanistan's GDP, or more than double the country's estimated maximum absorptive capacity.[142]

iv) One of the most evident reasons behind the US failure was its inability to find the right people for the right jobs: US personnel in Afghanistan were often unqualified and poorly trained,[143] while the

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[139] Stewart, *art. cit*.

[140] Dorani, *op. cit.*, p. 227.

[141] "Why America Keeps Building Up Corrupt Client States," *The Economist*, August 22, 2021 [https://www.economist.com/international/2021/08/22/why-america-keeps-building-corrupt-client-states], November 11, 2021. This situation is similar to the one in Vietnam prior to the 1975 US withdrawal, or to the one in Iraq after 2003, another state hollowed up by the corruption brought about by America's nation-building project.

[142] SIGAR, 2021, p. 31.

[143] To give but one example: when Maj. Louis Frias, an officer with the 8th PSYOP Battalion from Fort Bragg, North Carolina, deployed to Afghanistan in July 2003, he prepared by reading the paperback *Islam For Dummies* on the plane ride over. His team's biggest project was developing a comic book about the importance of voting, focused on a story about kids playing football, because, as Frias explained it, "football [*soccer – my note*] was such a big thing in Afghanistan." (Whitlock, *op. cit*., pp. 204-205). Members of the military sent to

competing visions of the military and civilian staff made meaningful progress even more difficult. Staff in every agency constantly rotated out, which forced their successors to start from scratch every time.

v) Persistent insecurity and violence on the ground severely undermined the American reconstruction efforts. For example, electoral processes were constantly affected by voter intimidation, especially in remote areas under Taliban control, while US staff were unsuccessful in persuading the frightened population to support the government. Another example of contradictory goals had to do with improving governance and eliminating a culture of impunity, while at the same time empowering predatory actors, such as Abdul Rashid Dostum, the former veteran of the Soviet-Afghan war and former Afghan vice-president between 2014 and 2020, in the name of improving security.[144]

vi) US government agencies rarely carried out sufficient monitoring and evaluation to assess the impact of their efforts. In other words, projects were considered "successful" regardless of whether they had contributed to more important, more comprehensive goals, and the absence of periodic reality checks increased the risk of doing the wrong thing perfectly. Over time, each agency became focused on doing something, anything at all, rather than doing what needed to be done.

vii) Last, but certainly not least: the US government had only a very limited understanding of the Afghan context and failed to adapt its strategy accordingly. It persisted in forcing Western technocratic models onto Afghan economic institutions, trained armed forces in complex weapons systems they could neither grasp nor maintain and tried to impose the rule of law on a country where 80% of disputes were settled through traditional informal means.[145] While the U.S. and the Afghan governments focused on extending governance through the provision of services, including the formal justice system, the Taliban competed for

Afghanistan were given cultural awareness classes using PowerPoint slides recycled from the Iraqi conflict, on the assumption that "Iraq, Afghanistan, it's the same thing." (p. 211).

[144] SIGAR, 2021, p. 6; Whitlock, *op. cit*., p. 330.

[145] SIGAR, 2021, pp. viii-xi, 77. For example, by providing material support and equipment to certain units within the ANDSF without consideration for ethnic dynamics between units, the United States could be perceived as biased in favor of one ethnic group or faction at the expense of another.

popular support by providing a semblance of security and justice via their own version of traditional dispute resolution.[146]

There is yet another factor that helps explain the rapid collapse of the Afghan government in August 2021 and the reestablishment of a Taliban regime: as I have already mentioned in a previous section, the Taliban were able to present themselves as an inspirational element closely tied to authentic Afghan identity. They claimed to fight for Islam and against foreign invaders, both powerful values in Afghan culture, while the government, allied with the foreign invaders, could not muster similar levels of support.[147] This fact, coupled with the failure of the Afghan army, whose ranks were swelled by thousands of "ghost soldiers" who only existed on paper, accounts for the Taliban's swift takeover of power as the last American troops were leaving Kabul.

Despite more than two centuries of European involvement and engagement in Afghanistan, at this point, very few lessons seem to have been learned. European, American and United Nations politicians, military strategists and specialists, as well as Afghan government officials, still appear to cling to discredited imperial models. Like all previous European interventions, the latest attempt by Western powers to put the extremism and violence genie back in the bottle has failed in terms of its original objectives. More seriously, it has let down the Afghan people they claimed to be liberating and the promised era of peace, stability and inclusiveness is as elusive as ever.[148] Ultimately, it is the Afghan people who are subject to the greatest tragedy: they have long been misused, sometimes with the best intentions, other times with the worst, by outsiders who saw them not as a people per se, but merely as a pawn in a Great Game that begs the question of whether it was truly necessary after all.

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[146] SIGAR, 2021, p. 74.

[147] Malkasian, *op. cit*., pp. 25, 1276. Additionally, one should not discount the important role that Pakistan's support for the Taliban played in their government takeover. See also Stewart, *art. cit*.

[148] Lee, *op. cit*., p. 692.

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