

COULD AFGHANISTAN BE A KEY TO ASIAN CO-OPERATION AND SECURITY?

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*"We will not be a pawn in someone else's game,
we will always be Afghanistan!"*
Ahmad Shah Masood¹

Afghanistan became one of the most significant points of international conflict just overnight on 27 December 1979 when a large Soviet airborne force occupied Kabul, signalling the Soviet invasion of this land-locked Asian country sandwiched between Iran, Soviet Central Asian, China and Pakistan.² The world perceived the Soviet offensive in Afghanistan as a bold step to instigate Moscow's long-standing imperial goal of expanding its borders towards south Asia to gain access to the Indian Ocean. Therefore, not only the immediate neighbours of Afghanistan, such as Pakistan and Iran, but regional actors near and far, such as Saudi

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- 1 This quotation by Ahmad Shah Masood was taken from the following website: "Quotes from Afghan Personalities of Yesterday and Today" <http://www.afghan-web.com/history/quotes.html>.
- 2 Afghanistan has 647,500 square kilometres of territory with 5529kms of border with the following countries: Pakistan (2,430 km), Iran (936 km), Turkmenistan (744 km), Uzbekistan (137 km), Tajikistan (1,206 km) and China (76 km). See 'UN Non-Paper: A Review of the Options on Embargo of Military Supplies to the Warring Factions in Afghanistan', cited in Sreedhar & Mahendra Ved, *Afghan Buzkashi: Power Games and Gamesmen*, Vol. 1. Delhi: Wordsmiths, 2000, p. 116.

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Arabia and the US, poured large amounts of money, arms and expertise into Afghanistan to counter the Soviet advance. Ten years after their unsuccessful, but extremely costly, bloody and devastating invasion, Soviet troops started to pull out of Afghanistan on 14 April 1988. Today, twelve years after the Soviet withdrawal and nine years after the December 1991 break up of the USSR, Afghanistan remains one of the major zones of both regional and international dispute in the early days of this century. The twenty-one year old war in Afghanistan has demonstrated to the world that the ambitions of outside actors (previously the USSR and later Pakistan, backed by Saudi Arabia and the US, and the US oil company Unocal) have brought to this land only destruction and human suffering by sustaining civil war and promoting anti-democratic and anti-human developments such as the Taliban.

The continued civil war in Afghanistan is not solely an internal affair, but has the obvious characteristics of a broader regional conflict with international parameters. Therefore, peace and stability in this land can only be achieved by the sincere commitment of all internal and external actors who have been involved in or contributed to this ordeal so far. Because of the clash of interests of the various countries in Asia and outside, Afghanistan is not just an intractable knot, but also a serious destabilising factor for the entire Asian region.

Afghanistan's dilemma stems from mainly two groups of actors: the primary group is that of the internal actors, each one concentrated on a particular nationality (ethnic group). The secondary group is that of the external actors who have been intensely playing with these internal actors, pitting one against another. The external group is engaged in very tricky pursuits that increase the already profound enmity between the nationality groups and that in turn fragments Afghanistan on ethnic lines. Both the internal actors and the external ones are equally accountable for the present tragedy. The real question facing all parties involved in this

conflict is whether they will hold on to their old policies or will pursue a new strategy of encouraging a democratic *rapprochement* between all nationality groups and set up a broad-based governing structure for Afghanistan?

NATIONAL DISHARMONY

As Louis Dupree explains in his remarkable work on Afghanistan, which gives a comprehensive description of the various nationalities, their characteristics and locations, the country lacks a national homogeneity partly due to disunity between the Pashtun and non-Pashtun nationalities throughout its history.³

Afghanistan has about fifteen or more nationalities and some of them are further divided into smaller tribal units. Among them, only the following ones had crucial leverage in the conflict: the Pashtuns, the Tajiks, the Turks (Uzbeks & Turkmens) and the Hazaras. Since we do not have reliable information about the total population of Afghanistan and the exact numbers of each ethnic group, I will not discuss the disputable figures given in various sources so far. Yet, the various estimates for each ethnic group show a discrepancy as follows: the Pashtuns vary between 38 to 50 percent of the total population (ca. 18 to 25 million), while the Tajiks 15 to 25 percent, the Hazaras 10 to 19 percent.⁴

One of the most vital aspects of these major nationality groups is that each occupies a specific part of the country as its native homeland. Thus, the Pashtun are concentrated in the mountainous areas in the south, called 'Pashtunistan' (Kandahar, Ghazni,

3 Louis Dupree, *Afghanistan*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973; for the ethnic composition of the country, see the following additional sources: Ralph H. Magnus & Eden Naby, *Afghanistan: Mullah, Marx, and Mujahid*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1998; Esedullah Oguz, *Afganistan: Sovyet İşgalinden İçsavaşa*, Istanbul: Cep Kitapları, 1998; Christine Noelle, *State and Tribe in Nineteenth-Century Afghanistan: The Reign of Amir Dost Muhammad Khan (1826-1863)*, London: Curzon, 1997.

4 Many non-Pashtun refugees, of course, challenge this calculation by arguing that there is not much differences between the percentages of each of Afghanistan's major nationalities, the Pashtuns, Tajiks and the Turks.

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Oruzgan, Paktika, Nangarhar and Vardak), whereas the Tajik are mainly in the central and the north-eastern districts of Kabul, Baghlan, Takhar, Samangan, Charikar, Panjshir, Dushi, Ghowr, Herat, Farah and Kunduz. The Uzbeks and Turkmens also occupy various parts of northern Afghanistan, areas local people refer to as 'Afghani Turkestan' from the historical Central Asian city of Herat in the north-west to the Wakhan corridor in the north-east. In various parts of Afghani Turkestan such as Takhar, Baghlan and Kunduz, the Tajiks, Uzbeks and Turkmens live side by side and intermarriage between these three ethnic groups is widespread. The Hazaras speak the Dari (Farsi) language, but are of Mongolian origin and they mainly dwell in the Hazarajat region of central Afghanistan, Meymaneh and Sar-e Pol. Despite serious fights between the political Mujahidin groups representing the Tajiks, Uzbeks, Turkmens and Hazaras in the civil war, all these non-Pashtun nationalities have a common antagonism against the Pashtuns, whom they regard as their primary adversary because of the Pashtun's record of open hostility in the last two centuries. Before the Soviet invasion, a succession of Afghan kings and governments followed a policy of moving Pashtuns from the south to the northern areas, thus depriving some non-Pashtuns of their cultivated lands. This official policy has, naturally, increased the animosity between the non-Pashtun nationalities and the Pashtuns. Consequently, the non-Pashtuns drove those Pashtun settlers, which they viewed as colonists, away from the northern regions (Afghani Turkestan) during the Soviet invasion and afterwards.⁵

The second vital aspect of the nationality question in Afghanistan is that many of these nationalities have their brethren in adjacent areas of various countries: the Afghani Pashtuns' kinsmen, called Pathans, live in large numbers in Pakistan, while close relatives of the Afghani Tajiks, Uzbeks and Turkmens reside in the

⁵ Based on interviews conducted by the author with the various refugees of Tajik, Uzbek and Turkmen origin in Turkey and Germany between 1982 and 1995. One of these refugees, Esedullah Oguz, well illustrates the settlement policy of the Pashtuni governments in the northern areas in his recent book: Esedullah Oguz, *ibid.*, 1998.

three independent Central Asian states bordering northern Afghanistan (Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan). Developments since the Soviet invasion, especially after the Soviet troop withdrawal and the emergence of the Central Asian republics after the downfall of the Soviet empire, have displayed the essential fact that relations between neighbouring countries and the Afghani Mujahidin are exclusively based on ethno-linguistic and religious factors. Pakistan has always supported mainly the Pashtun groups of Afghanistan (previously Hikmatyar and now the Taliban) whereas Iran continues to bolster the Persian-speaking Hazaras and Tajiks (Burhanuddin Rabbani and Ahmad Shah Masood). The Afghani Tajiks have managed to establish strong ties with both government and opposition circles in Tajikistan over the last six years. Uzbekistan once wholeheartedly helped the Uzbek general Abdul Rashid Dostum. Turkmenistan can be regarded as the only exception because the Turkmen president Saparmurad Niyazov, the self-proclaimed *Turkmenbashi* (head of the Turkmens), struck a deal with the Taliban in a plan the US oil company Unocal and Pakistan prepared to secure transportation of Turkmen oil through Taliban-held Afghanistan to Pakistani ports in Indian Ocean. Niyazov's policy has widely alienated the Afghani Turkmens from Turkmenistan.

ACTORS

The past and present key internal actors are not products of unanimous selection or election by a given ethnic group, instead they have imposed their will and leadership on an ethnic group by either their own individual efforts or by the substantial support of one or more external actors. This is especially valid in the cases of Gulbuddin Hikmatyar and the Taliban. Hikmatyar's rise to become the most powerful Pashtun leader and his fall after the creation of the Taliban demonstrates the role of Pakistan's military and ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence) agency.

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The main political resistance groups formed in Afghanistan also belong to particular nationality groups. For example, Hizbi Islami (Islamic Party) is a Pashtun grouping, Hizbi Wahdat (Unity Party) belongs to the Hazaras, the Jamiat-i-Islami (Islamic Society) to the Tajiks and the Jumbesh-i-Milli Islami (National Islamic Alliance) to the Uzbeks and Turkmens.

Internal actors have mostly sought help from outside actors. Pakistan has been the most dynamic and predominant external actor in Afghanistan since the Soviet invasion. Pakistan's rivalry with both Iran and India forced Islamabad to ensure a surrogate Afghanistan through attempting to install Gulbuddin Hikmatyar (before 1994) and the Taliban (after 1994) in Kabul. The establishment of a client regime in Afghanistan helps Pakistan restrain the irredentist claims among the Pashtun leaders for a 'Greater Pashtunistan', which could claim Pathan-inhabited Pakistani territories. Pakistan has also hoped to settle the Durand Line dispute with Afghanistan in its favour through a government under Pakistani patronage in Kabul. Pakistan will remain as a principal barrier to any peace effort in Afghanistan unless it reverses its unconditional backing of the Taliban. Unfortunately, Pakistani Chief Executive, Pervez Musharraf, continues to follow the policy of supporting the Taliban. It is evident that the Taliban could not stay in power in Afghanistan if Islamabad stopped its assistance.⁶ Since Pakistan is heavily dependant on Saudi and US aid, Washington and Riyadh could force Pakistan to modify its Afghan policy.

Iran's involvement in Afghan developments was minimal during the Soviet occupation, but became sharply magnified after the Soviet withdrawal and its disengagement from the war with Iraq. Tehran prefers to support the non-Pashtun resistance groups, especially the Persian-speaking Shiah Hazaras and the Tajiks and opposes the

⁶ "In September 1996, about 2,000 men of the Pakistan Army in the garb of Taliban captured Kabul. Similarly, at the time of the capture of Mazar-e Sharif in August 1998, 3,000 Pakistani troops participated in the operation." This and other detailed information of Pakistani military involvement in the campaigns of Taliban can be found in Sreedhar and Mahendra Ved, *ibid.*, pp. 157-161.

Pakistani-led Taliban. An improvement in both Iran-Saudi and Iran-US relations could also be a positive factor in a peace process in Afghanistan. This in turn requires that Tehran pursue a more moderate policy towards Afghanistan and the Central Asian countries.

The main objectives of the US and Saudi Arabia have changed over the years. Their initial aim was to force the Soviet Union out of Afghanistan. After the Soviet withdrawal, they wholeheartedly backed Pakistani plots to secure stability in Afghanistan by setting up a Pakistani client regime in Kabul. Osama bin Laden's alleged bombings of the US embassies in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and Nairobi, Kenya, on 7 August 1998, however, was a clear turning point in US policy on Afghanistan. After this date, the US backed off from Pakistan's scheme of supporting the Taliban regime.

The other actors on the scene include Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Russia, China, India and Turkey each of which have extended their somewhat limited assistance at various times to various fractions in Afghanistan. Russia, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan are most concerned about Central Asian-Afghani borders and the spill over of the Islamic resistance groups and fundamentalist ideology from Afghanistan. Beijing is uneasy because of its serious problems with Turkic-Muslim nationalities (chiefly the Uighurs) in the Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Region (East Turkestan) of China. Because of Sino-Soviet and Sino-Indian rivalry, the Chinese leadership collaborated with the West and Pakistan in supplying arms and ammunition and extending covert diplomatic support to the Afghan resistance. After the Soviet withdrawal, the Chinese extended military aid to the Hazaras. On the other hand, India kept silent during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, because of its friendly relationship with the USSR – a vital counterweight to Pakistani-Chinese collaboration. After the withdrawal of Soviet troops, New Delhi looked for opportunities to counter Pakistani moves in Afghanistan. Turkey played a minimal role in developments in Afghanistan after the

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Soviet invasion, despite the fact that Turkey made very important contributions to Afghan education, especially higher military training for officers, from the 1920s until the late 1960s. The growth of Afghani-Soviet relations in later years demoted the old contacts with Turkey.⁷ Since the Soviet withdrawal, Turkey has increased its diplomatic efforts for a peaceful solution of the Afghan crisis. Turkey offered somewhat limited financial aid and cultural assistance to Turkic nationalities in Afghanistan. A Turkish consulate was operating in Mazar-e Sharif, the capital of the northern regions under Abdul Rashid Dostum, until the Taliban captured the city. There seems to be a change in Turkish foreign policy in recent years towards expanding diplomatic contacts with various political actors inside Afghanistan. However, Turkey will make sure that its Turkic-speaking brethren acquire a justified share in any future political solution for Afghanistan.⁸

CONCLUSION

The well-known scholar on Afghanistan Barnett R. Rubin asserts, "What failed in Afghanistan was not just the Afghan state, but the international system that had first sustained and then undermined its rulers." He argues, "If the international community seriously wants to rebuild Afghanistan, it must start with a framework for regional co-operation."⁹ A renowned scholar of anthropology, M. Nazif Shahrani, rightfully petitions the peoples of Afghanistan and the international community: "The price for *not* acting responsibly, and supporting the bloody rampage of the Taliban in their campaign to re-establish Pashtun supremacy in the country, is huge: it is nothing less than the very viability and national integrity of Afghanistan, and the preservation of the newly gained freedoms by

7 For a detailed history of relations between Afghanistan and Turkey, see the following Turkish source: Mehmet Saray, *Afghanistan ve Türkler*, İstanbul: İstanbul Üniversitesi, 1987.

8 Based on the author's personal interviews with several Turkish diplomats and special envoys involved in Afghan developments.

9 Barnett R. Rubin, *The Search for Peace in Afghanistan: from Buffer State to Failed State*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995, pp. 143-145.

all the citizens of a reunited Afghanistan.” He offers the following solution to the problem: “Therefore, we must aspire to establish models of community self-governance and national state structures that guarantee both the freedom and liberty of all peoples inhabiting Afghanistan, as well as the territorial integrity and full independence of the nation itself. Absolutely nothing short of that should do.”¹⁰

If the world community listens to the warnings of these and the scores of other wise scholars, Afghanistan’s dilemma rests on the shoulders of both internal and external actors who have turned this beautiful land (*jannat*) into a hell (*jahannam*).¹¹ Therefore, any peaceful solution to this prolonged conflict calls for genuine goodwill from all parties involved on the following three points:

1. Recognition of Afghanistan as a multiethnic country: this will not lead to the fragmentation of the country on ethnic lines, but will safeguard its unity by ensuring that all nationality groups have an equal share of power at all levels. In speaking of the nationalities of Afghanistan, a German scholar indicates, “What they fight for is the preservation of their local, cultural, and religious autonomy, not disintegration.”¹²
2. Installing a federative government structure based on democratic foundations: this can provide complete self-rule for

10 M. Nazif Shahrani, “The Future of the State and the Structure of Community Governance in Afghanistan” in William Maley (ed.), *Fundamentalism Reborn? Afghanistan and the Taliban*, London: Hurst & Company, 1998, pp. 241-242.

11 Among many other sources, the following ones were extensively consulted during the writing of this article: David B. Edwards, *Heroes of the Age: Moral Fault Lines on the Afghan Frontier*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996; Olivier Roy, *Afghanistan: From Holy War to Civil War*, Princeton: Darwin Press, 1995; Rasul Bakhsh Rais, *War Without Winners: Afghanistan’s Uncertain Transition after the Cold War*, Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1994; Kurt Lohbeck, *Holy War, Unholy Victory*, Washington DC: Regnery Gateway, 1993; Riaz M. Khan, *Untying the Afghan Knot: Negotiating Soviet Withdrawal*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1991; Milan Hauner, *The Soviet War in Afghanistan: Patterns of Russian Imperialism*, Philadelphia: University of America, 1991; Rosanne Klass (ed.), *Afghanistan: The Great Game Revisited*, New York: Freedom House, 1990; M. Nazif Shahrani & Robert L. Canfield (eds.), *Revolutions & Rebellions in Afghanistan: Anthropological Perspectives*, Berkeley: University of California, 1979.

12 Bernt Glatzer, ‘Afghanistan: Ethnic and Tribal Disintegration?’ in William Maley (ed.), *ibid.*, p. 181.

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each nationality to preserve the unity of the country and help diminish hostilities between them.¹³

3. Regional co-operation instead of regional power rivalry: the past and present antagonisms between Iran-Pakistan, Iran-US, Pakistan-India over Afghanistan as well as Central Asian republics have always been counterproductive. Afghanistan could serve as a model country where the US, Pakistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, China, India, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Russia and perhaps other countries may co-operate in re-building Afghanistan.

Since the Soviet Union's and Pakistan's adventures in Afghanistan have painfully proved that no one can gain long-term profit from biased and single-handed involvements, there is a good possibility now that the various countries concerned with the Afghan tragedy can turn the track of history toward the long-awaited regional co-operation and security in Asia. Let us hope that the strong confidence expressed by the Afghani-Tajik leader Ahmad Shah Masood becomes real for the first time: "We will not be a pawn in someone else's game, we will always be Afghanistan!"

¹³ Mohammad-Hassan Mohieddin Najafi, advisor to the Iranian Foreign Minister and Iran's former ambassador to Afghanistan, expresses a similar view in his article: 'Afghanistan: Past, Present, Future' in *Amu Darya: The Iranian Journal of Central Asian Studies*, Tehran, Vol. 1, No. 2 (summer & autumn 1966), pp. 231-238.