



## The Mistakes of Super Powers in Afghanistan

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**Abstract:** Afghanistan's strategic location and lying at the crossroad linking the Central Asian States with South Asian region motivated major powers to take interest and competing with each other for the purpose of dominance. This paved the way for making Afghanistan battleground of different powers. So, Afghanistan is a country with a myriad history inflicted with conflicts of interests among regional and international powers. Therefore, Afghanistan has a deep history of insurgency, resistance and wars that shapes the perceptions of the people who live there. For instance, Taliban propaganda portrayed Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai as an American Shah Shuja, a cutting reference to the king the British brought to power in 1839 during the First Anglo-Afghan War (1839-42). When British troops deployed to southern Afghanistan in 2006, residents feared they had been sent to take revenge for the Afghan victory at the Battle of Maiwand which took place there during the Second Anglo-Afghan War in 1880. In addition, plans for withdrawing international forces from Afghanistan, immediately make Afghans recall the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 that began a slide to civil war. However, the super powers interferences in the internal affairs (cultural and religious values) of the Afghans lead to wars and political turmoil so much so that the country cannot be turned to a stable state. The paper examines the mistakes of major powers and their destruction role in the continuing civil war and miserable situations of the Afghan people.

**Keywords:** *United States, NATO, Soviet Union, Foreign Invasions, Insurgency, Afghans Cultural and Religious Values.*

### INTRODUCTION

Since September 11, 2001 Afghanistan has dominated the news, as it often did during the Soviet Union occupation (1979-89). But even in the 19th and early 20th centuries, when its mountain ranges provided the arena where much of the Great Game was played out, Afghanistan was the focal point of East-West relations. Squeezed between four empires - Russia, China, India and Persia - it has a tortured history that provides an extraordinary glimpse onto the patterns of world movements.

Afghanistan is sadly a victim of its geo-strategic location, with internecine conflicts spanning centuries. Not only did multiple marauding armies try to make their way into the Indian subcontinent through the Khaybar Pass, the country was also the platform for “the Great Game” between global powers. Its strategic location and lying at the crossroad linking the Central Asian States with South Asian region forced major powers to take interests and competing with each other for the purpose of dominance. This paved the way for making Afghanistan battleground of different powers.

Afghanistan, though a landlocked state, has undoubtedly enjoyed an eminent strategic location because of being located at the crossroads of Asia, Middle East, and the Persian Gulf. A Russian scholar had said that Afghanistan, economically, is of no importance; its importance lies in its geographical location. So, Afghanistan has always been strategically important for global powers; it is easy to penetrate from Central Asia and leads on to India in the east and Persia and the riches of the Middle East in the west (McCauley, 2002: 3-4).

Afghanistan is a geographically well-defined country, whose borders were formed during a long period of conflicts and resistance against outsiders, most notably the British and Russian Empires. Dating from 1747, the country has a far longer history as a distinct national entity with continuity to the present than most of its neighbors such as Pakistan, created in 1947 with artificially demarcated borders in two separate parts, or the central Asian states to the north formed after the break-up of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991. Unlike some of its neighbors, Afghanistan has never had a significant secessionist movement. And the 1880-1929 (Arnold, 1981: 19) and 1933-73 periods show that the country can be stable and effectively governed (Wahab and Youngerman, 2007: 119-24). The Afghan society of the two mentioned periods was a culture built around communities enjoying each other’s company in what was a beautiful, vibrant and safe country.

This peace was shattered in 1979, when the Soviet Union invaded and plunged the region into more than four decades of wars and instability. The presence of the Soviets in Afghanistan led to others foreign powers funding and creating the mujahedin. After the Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, the United States ended its support and neglected Afghanistan and led the different mujahedin groups to fight with each other. This situation weakened the Afghan government and created the power vacuum. It was in this situation that the Taliban emerged. Afghanistan experienced another two decades of war when the United States invaded in 2001, after the 9/11 attack on the Unites States organized by Osama bin Laden from Afghan soil. The US and its allies NATO forces withdrew on August 15, 2021, and allow the Taliban to return to power. The renewal of violence and chaos serves only to illustrate

the cyclical nature of foreign invasion and subsequent abandonment that ordinary citizens of Afghanistan have suffered. Unfortunately, the real victims of these failed invasion and interventions of global powers have been the people of Afghanistan.

## **METHOD**

For the purpose of the present study, the sources on regional and superpowers involvements and interferences in internal affairs of Afghanistan which caused the civil war and the destruction of all infrastructures of the country in the second half of the 20th century which continued till now, have been closely observed. To indicate the role of foreign powers in Afghanistan's wars, sources and data on the different stages of the wars have been used. Beside the historical books, I also used Journals, essays, newspapers, maps, Documentaries and so on, about the interferences of superpowers in the internal affairs of Afghanistan.

The method considered in this article is qualitative method. In this method, first, the sources relevant to the subject were collected, after ascertainment of their authenticity and credibility; the collection of raw material was over. The mass of raw material had been properly reviewed, unified, refined and processed; various points relating to a particular topics and sub-topics brought together and co-related in a rational way, and then the conclusion drawn, interpreting the facts carefully to illustrate the destruction role and mistakes of superpowers in Afghanistan from the 19th century till now.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Foreign Powers Rivalries**

The possibility of Afghanistan's neighbors playing "spoiler" roles and of regional rivalries undermining transition is very real. Exactly hundred years after the British contrived to set up Afghanistan as a buffer state between the expanding Russia Empire in Central Asia and their empire in India, the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan blurred the frontiers between the successor states of the Czarist Russia and British Empires (Rasanayagam, 2011: 102). Pakistan's military dictator, Zia ul-Haq, was more than willing to lead a crusade against the Soviets in Afghanistan. After Soviet invasion, his trusted director-general of ISI, advised him that there would be a convergence of religious, political and strategic gains if Pakistan were to assume the role of an Islamic champion against communist aggression (Yousaf and Adkin, 1992: 25-6).

Historical experience and the current situation in Pakistan indicate that there may be a need to plan around, or at a minimum for contingency planning, with respect to Pakistan for example preventing a meaningful peace

agreement with the Taliban. Iran and to a lesser extent other regional countries may also raise issues for the transition. More generally, the Soviet withdrawal period shows both the difficulties in reaching a peaceful solution to a conflict during military withdrawal, and the adverse consequences of failure to do so (Byrd, October 1, 2012). The United States underestimated the role of the Afghanistan's neighbors and regional powers in stability and development of Afghanistan. So, these powers help and support the insurgency by providing safe heaven for their activities, which finally the Taliban succeeded to take power again in 2021 and forced the United States and its allies NATO to leave the country in August 15, 2021. As we have seen, the United States faced same fate as the Soviet Union in 1989.

#### Interventions and Occupations

Over the past 170 years, Afghanistan has experienced four direct interventions by Western powers: two Anglo-Afghans Wars (1839-42 and 1878-80) in the 19th century, a Soviet occupation in the 20th century (1979-89), and an American-led invasion in 21th century (2001-21). The reasons each power chose to go into Afghanistan were quite different. The British saw Afghanistan as a bulwark for the defense of greater India against possible threats by an expanding Russia. By contrast, the Soviet Union intervened in Afghanistan in support of a failing client regime, fearful that it would appear weak if it did nothing to prevent the new revolutionary Afghan socialist government from collapsing. The US invaded Afghanistan to topple the Taliban because they had provided the bases for the al-Qaeda terrorists who mounted the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington. But, whatever the reasons they chose to enter Afghanistan, all followed strikingly similar policies once they got there. They first entering Afghanistan attempted to remake it in their own image but discover the virtues of doing things the Afghan way then they wish to leave.

The Soviet Union optimistically viewed its military intervention in Afghanistan at the end of 1979 as a limited action with a short time horizon-assumption that proved unfounded and whose lack of realism would have been apparent from a review of Afghanistan history. And unfortunately the United States and its allies NATO did not learned any lesson from the Soviet occupation when they initiated the international military intervention in Afghanistan after 9/11. The United States made the same mistake as the Soviet Union did; and finally they withdrew from Afghanistan on August 15, 2021 (Barfield, fall 2012).

Afghanistan in the 1980s was a breeding ground for terrorist training camps and other such rebel activities. The withdrawal of the Soviet army was regarded as a victory not only for Afghanistan but also for the Islamic world, western countries and especially for the United States, which had championed

the removal of Russian occupation and control throughout three presidencies, from Jimmy Carter to the early presidency of George H. W. Bush. The United States was glad to see that the mujahedin forces had successfully overthrown the Soviets, thus eliminating the Cold War threat for the control of oil in the Persian Gulf. However, the problem with this victory occurred after the defeat and removal of the Soviet forces, as the United States did not little to help the country in the aftermath of the war and virtually abandoned the mujahedin forces to restore the country. After asserting itself in the oil-rich Persian Gulf, the United States lost interest in Afghanistan and did not help to rebuild this war-torn land (Runion, 2007: 119).

The US and its coalition partners face to the same and similar path. For twenty years, they have pursued a policy of Afghan nation-building to create a highly centralized government with a robust security force, a democratic political system, and a market economy. They have also attempted to bring social Afghan norms in line with international values. These plans to reorganize Afghan society and government have proved far more difficult to implement than expected. They have also been more expensive than first anticipated and, when insurgencies emerged, demanded a military commitment that home governments were unwilling to maintain over the long term. It is not surprising, then, that the US and its allies withdrawal of 15 August 2021, resembles similar periods in the past (Barfield, fall 2012).

### **Ignoring Cultural and Religious Values**

Afghan government and society is based on tribal cultural and conservative religious values. Afghanistan is a multiethnic country composed of several ethnic groups like Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, Turkmen and so on. The relationship between all of these various ethnic and linguistic groups is based on two main points: ethnic identity and national identity (Nojumi, 2002: 2). They do not compromise on their culture and religious sentiments as they have resisted several foreign aggressions which tried to meddle with their religious and cultural values. Historically, the Great Britain, the Soviet Union and the United States had also tried their best to impose their will on Afghans with immense power and advanced technology of that time. However, after facing strong resistance from Afghans they were forced to withdraw their forces from Afghanistan (Bilal, February 20, 2022).

Samuel P. Huntington in his book "Clash of Civilizations" mentions that the West has always wanted to impose its culture and ideology to prevail and dominate over other cultures. The United States tried undertaking the same in Afghanistan after analyzing Afghanistan's strategic importance and the perceived US interests in the region. In this regard, Afghanistan gained top priority in US foreign policy leading to its involvement in Afghanistan on two

different occasions. For the first time, it indirectly got involved against the Soviet Union during the Cold War with an aim to curtail the communist ideology. The second time, following September 11 attacks of 2001, the US launched its war on terror against al-Qaeda and other fundamentalist groups (Clements, 2003: xiii).

In the first instance, the United States accomplished its interests by indirectly defeating the Soviet Union but in the latter one, even after the acclaimed death of Osama Bin Laden, the US left the country almost empty-handed with immense monetary losses and strategic failures. The common factor in both times for Afghans was the foreign threat to their ideology, social and religious values. The United States made the same mistake as the Soviet Union.

The United States faced defeat where it was fighting against the ideology and set of rules of the natives. The main reason for the Afghans' victory against the Great Britain, the Soviet Union and the United States was their will and resilience to defend their popular socio-religious sentiments. The western powers, such as the US and its allies NATO, failed to defeat the Taliban as they mistook the Taliban as an isolated group, not as having an ideology that enjoys massive public support. The popular domestic support for Taliban cannot be ruled out after all as they have successfully captured Afghanistan twice now, and that too without weapons as sophisticated as held by their adversaries (Bilal, February 20, 2022).

### **Unrealistically Reforms**

Expectations about the pace of progress need to keep modest. Whether domestically or externally driven, overly ambitious reform efforts with unrealistically short timeframes particularly those disturbing established power relations in rural areas and affecting religion, culture, and the role of women have led to sharp domestic reactions that set back development, sometimes for decades (Byrd, October 1, 2012).

Afghanistan provides all too many examples of the wisdom of Winston Churchill's saying "those that fail to learn from history, are doomed to repeat it." Great Britain forgot the hard-learned lessons from the First Anglo-Afghan War (1839-42) and got caught in the misadventure of the second Anglo-Afghan-War (1878-80). After their initial victories in the first Anglo-Afghan War, the British made the modernization of the Afghan state a top priority. They reorganized its administrative and financial structure, making it more efficient and substantially increasing the amount of tax revenue it collected. They abolished the old feudal military system based on land grants and replaced it with a much smaller professional army trained by British officers. They also had plans to reform the judicial system by using professional, state-

appointed judges to replace the existing corps of Muslim clerics, whom they deemed hopelessly corrupt. Because the British found Afghan officials - including the ruler they had installed - reluctant to carry out these changes they appointed their own personnel to oversee the process within the Afghan government (Barfield, fall 2012).

The Afghan communist government that took power in a military coup in 1978 did not appear to have learned from the failed westernization and reform experiment of King Amanullah (1919-29); it imposed radical changes and engaged in brutal repression, quickly stirring up a violent reaction that threatened the new regime (McCauley, 2002: 16-17).

### **Weakness of Military Forces**

The United States and its allies NATO, exaggerated the strengthen and power of the Afghan military forces. As the expectation of ordinary Afghans and those who read the history of Soviet Union withdrawal in 1989, before the process of US and NATO troop's withdrawal completed, the Afghan military forces disintegrated and without any serious fight and resistance, they surrendered to the Taliban. However, the post-Soviet withdrawal period shows the potential and limitation of Afghan security forces: holding onto Kabul and other large cities is probably the most that can be hoped for, whereas the post-Soviet Afghan army held together reasonably well until near the end (Byrd, October 1, 2012).

The soviet and post-Soviet experience with arming and paying militias suggests that this approach is fraught with danger, risking instability given dependence on payments to militia leaders and exacerbating grievances and drivers of conflict due to predatory behavior of many militias (Byrd, October 1, 2012). Unfortunately, Afghan government with the advice and order of their foreign (US and NATO) military advisors did the same mistake as the Afghan communist. The local police and local army spread the warlordism across the country which was an unsuccessful experience and the main cause of the collapse of Kabul regime in 1992. So, the Afghan government faced the same fate and collapsed in August 15, 2021, even before the process of the withdrawal of the United States and NATO forces completed.

### **Mismanagement of Financial Support**

Afghanistan during most of its history has depended on outside financial support in various forms, and the republic period was no exception. While aid declined from the extraordinary high levels after 2014, it was a recipe for disaster, as occurred most notably in 1991-92 when the Soviet Union in its final days stopped all support to the Najibullah regime and it quickly collapsed (Byrd, October 1, 2012). Even tough, the US and its allies did

not completely stooped financial supporting the Afghan government, but during the 20 years of their presence and spending billions of US Dollars in Afghanistan, they did not invest in infrastructures to help for self-sufficiency of the country. With their complete withdrawal in August 15, 2021, all the institutions and organizations which they established collapsed; today Afghans suffering from economic sanctions which imposed by the US on Taliban government to revenge its humiliation defeat in Afghanistan. In fact, what the invasion has failed to do over the twenty years of the United States and its allies NATO presence in Afghanistan was to create a stable foundation to maintain the peace, solidarity, and stable government.

### **The Defeat of Superpowers**

Because of its strategic location and proximity to the Arabian Sea, Afghanistan has been the battle ground of great-power rivalry for many centuries. Owing to its difficult terrain (harsh weather, barren land and scattered population), tricks of the popular guerrilla-style fighting and strong belief system, Afghanistan came to be famously known as the graveyard of great empires. History is witness to the fact that the Afghans not let the foreign powers to control their land no matter how powerful they were.

Be it the great Britain (First Anglo-Afghan War 1839-42 and the Second Anglo-Afghan War 1878-80) (Clements, 2003: xvii) for keeping its interests and colonies in the Indian subcontinent; the Soviet Union occupation of Afghanistan (1979-89) for spreading and preaching of Communism; or the United States of America and its allies NATO (2001-21), for the alleged war on terrorism – the superpowers of their times, had to retreat one by one from Afghanistan. They did not only end up unsuccessful in achieving their end goal, but also ended up losing precious lives, wealth, prestige and gained humiliation. As the history of Afghanistan reflects, it has now become obvious that the states that intervened in the internal matters of Afghanistan, whether to preach communism or seek regime change, faced obstacles than benefits by interfering in the country and challenging the people's values and belief system (Bilal, Ahmad, PakistanToday, February 20, 2022).

After 9/11, the United States has spent two decades in Afghanistan and it's quite familiar with Afghanistan's dependence on foreign aid and assistance. Therefore, when the conventional military means have failed, the US and its allies are now trying to compel the Taliban by using non-conventional tactics revolving around diplomacy and economy to bring the country to its knees. Earlier the United States froze the Afghan Central Bank's assets worth of \$9.5 billion. Since Afghanistan is already facing severe economic crisis, such economic sanctions could worsen the livelihood of common Afghans leading to mass migration within and across borders.



## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, some lessons from Afghanistan's turbulent history constitute warnings and cautionary themes about what can go wrong. This reflects the reality of the country's history, and both Afghans and international community should move forward with eyes open so problems and risks can be managed better and mitigated to the extent possible. Over the past 170 years, Afghanistan has experienced four direct interventions by Western powers: two Anglo-Afghans Wars in the 19th century, a Soviet occupation in the 20th century, and an American-led invasion in 21th century. The reasons each power chose to go into Afghanistan were quite different. The British saw Afghanistan as a bulwark for the defense of greater India against possible threats by an expanding Russia. By contrast, the Soviet Union intervened in Afghanistan in support of a failing client regime, fearful that it would appear weak if it did nothing to prevent the new revolutionary Afghan socialist government from collapsing. The US invaded Afghanistan to topple the Taliban because they had provided the bases for the al-Qaeda terrorists who mounted the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington. But, whatever the reasons they chose to enter Afghanistan, all followed strikingly similar policies once they got there. All these foreign powers which invaded Afghanistan, they did not come to help the people and develop the democratic institutions'; each of them had their own agendas and program. All the powers faced strong resistances which at the end, they had to leave the country and the people of Afghanistan suffered from their bad legacies a lot till now.

Afghans do not compromise on their culture and religious sentiments as they have resisted several foreign aggressions which tried to meddle with their religious and cultural values. Historically, the Great Britain, the Soviet Union and the United States had also tried their best to impose their will on Afghans with immense power and advanced technology of that time. However, after facing strong resistance from Afghans they were forced to withdraw their forces from Afghanistan.

The most important lesson that the world could learn from the example of foreign intervention in countries such as Afghanistan would be to give some consideration and acknowledgement to the cultural and religious sentiments of the local Afghans. A thorough study of world history speaks volumes about the devastating effects of interference in the internal affairs of Afghanistan. In the first, each and every adventure of the great powers has proven to be detrimental to development and stability in Afghanistan. The invading country seems to have achieved its interests by exercising its physical might as per their will but on the contrary such adventures have brought even more severe consequences for the invading parties.

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