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Afghan Instability in the Early 21st Century: a cauldron of geostrategic intrigue

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December 2013







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Abstract

The central thesis of this paper is that the US-led intervention in Afghanistan, a major part of the so-called 'War on Terror' that has dominated international relations since 2001, has failed to deliver greater stability to Afghanistan and its immediate region. Indeed, it conjectures that the region will be more unstable during the next decade as the US reduces and possibly (completely) withdraws its presence from Afghanistan.

It also contends that the aspirations and hopes that the West has for Afghanistan (and that the majority of Afghans have themselves) are being suborned to the ambitions of other regional powers, competing for regional dominance. It concludes that in this contemporary version of the 19th century's 'Great Game', the interests of the Afghan people continue to be inconsequential to the *realpolitik* ambitions of regional powers and that Afghanistan will continue to be a cauldron of geostrategic intrigue well into the 21st century.

Map: Afghanistan and its region

(Source: Google Maps)

Afghan Instability in the Early 21st Century: a cauldron of geostrategic intrigue

Introduction

In 2008, the then speaker of Iran's Parliament, Ali Larijani, told a visiting Afghan delegation that 'after seven years, the presence of foreign forces in Afghanistan has not only failed to bring security and stability but has undermined security and increased extremism'.[1] Although those comments were made over five years ago, Larijani's point remains valid.

This paper contends that the US-led intervention in Afghanistan, a major part of the so-called 'War on Terror' that has dominated international relations since 2001, has not delivered greater stability to Afghanistan and its immediate region. The region will be more unstable during the next decade as the US reduces and possibly (completely) withdraws its presence from Afghanistan.

In the lead-up to 2001, Afghanistan had been wracked by conflict for over two decades with most of the country under the grip of fundamentalist Taliban rule. These troubles produced catastrophic results for large portions of the Afghan population and there was a spill-over effect to neighbouring countries, causing strains and periodic tensions between regional governments and the Taliban. In an overall sense, however, the region was relatively stable. The so-called '9/11' terrorist attacks and, in particular, the way in which the US responded to those attacks, fundamentally changed this situation.

While regional stability was not an overtly-stated goal behind US operations in Afghanistan, it is reasonable to infer that it was an inherent part of US operations—to make it difficult for terrorists to 'train new recruits and coordinate their evil plans'

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1 Frederick Kagan, Ahmad Majidyar, Danielle Pletka and Marisa Cochrane Sullivan, *Iranian Influence in the Levant, Egypt, Iraq, and Afghanistan*, Washington DC, American Enterprise Institute and Institute for the Study of War, 21 May 2012, Loc. 3840 of 6293 (Kindle iPad edition).

in Afghanistan.[2] Stability was certainly a fundamental tenet of subsequent nation-building efforts implemented by the US and its coalition allies, including the post-Taliban Afghan government.

In international relations terms, Afghanistan is arguably more unstable in 2013 than it was in 2001, and will be so for some time to come. The Taliban insurgency has spread to Pakistan, Afghanistan is still struggling to develop its infrastructure and lagging economy, and uncertainty exists as to the identity and nature of the new national government scheduled to be elected in 2014. There is anxiety about how Afghan authorities will manage the nation after the transition of control of security arrangements in 2014, and it is questionable whether the West will maintain any presence or interest as time passes. All regional actors are hedging their policy positions, gaming Washington's possible actions.[3] This uncertainty is feeding a palpable sense of instability, as each regional actor wants to influence events in Afghanistan to best complement their own strategic ambitions. Uncertainty defines the coming decade and, from that, a dissonance arises as to perceptions and realities of the future security landscape.

This paper is divided into three parts. The first is a brief historical overview and analysis of Afghanistan in the years leading up to June 2013, when Afghan forces took responsibility for security operations throughout the country. Part One will demonstrate the scope of damage caused to the nation from ongoing conflicts since 1979, provide context to the reasons for Western intervention in 2001, as well as the subsequent course of developments in regards to the insurgency and move towards the so-called 'Transition'.

Part Two discusses the international relations drivers for Afghanistan, the US and key regional actors. These nations have critical interests in Afghanistan, even if it is for little reason other than preventing their rivals from shaping and influencing Afghan policy or security interests. Within this cauldron of geostrategic intrigue,

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2 George W. Bush, 'Address to the Nation on Operations in Afghanistan', 7 October 2001, 'Selected Speeches of President George W. Bush: 2001-2008', The White House, President George W. Bush archive website, p. 75, available at <http://georgewbushwhitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/bushrecord/documents/Selected_Speeches_George_W_Bush.pdf>, accessed 10 May 2013.

3 C. Christine Fair, 'Under the Shrinking US Security Umbrella: India's end game in Afghanistan?', *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 2, Spring 2011, p. 186.

Afghanistan itself is attempting to normalise its role in the international community, while at the same time combating a seemingly-unending insurgency.

Part Three will project from the present into the next decade, prognosticating on why the region will continue to be unstable. A generic scenario will be proffered and critiqued as a way of highlighting the complexity and determination of regional actors to pursue *realpolitik* agendas that will contribute to the aura of uncertainty. The paper will then conclude on the concept of the so-called 'Great Game', how it is relevant to issues of instability, and why it will continue to be applicable to the Afghan region during the next decade.

Part One – Stage Setting for the 21st Century

Afghan instability in the 1980s and 1990s

Afghanistan 'links three major cultural and geographic regions: the Indian sub-continent to the southeast, central Asia to the north and the Iranian plateau in the west'.[4] Afghanistan has historically been a 'land bridge over which great powers have crossed in pursuit of imperial ambitions and commercial goals'.[5] The nation consists of mostly arid lands inhabited by scores of diverse ethnic groups and tribes, deeply conservative, religious and Islamic. Afghanistan emerged as a modern state in the mid-18th century when, under the leadership of Ahmad Shah Durrani, it was an expansionist, Pashtun-led empire controlling parts of modern day Iran, Pakistan and India.[6] Durrani's death in 1772 sparked a quick decline and, by the early 19th century, Afghanistan again was isolated from the outside world.

The country soon came to be regarded as a pawn in the so-called 'Great Game', the contest between the Russian and British empires. Afghanistan's role in the game was that of a buffer zone between the two inexorably expanding empires, both of which sought to influence or control Afghan policies through diplomatic, commercial and military means. Afghan rulers during most of the 19th and 20th centuries proved 'remarkably shrewd' in dealing with the outside world, cultivating

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4 Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: a cultural and political history*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2010, p. 1.

5 Marvin G. Weinbaum, *Afghanistan and Its Neighbors: an ever dangerous neighborhood,* Washington DC, US Institute of Peace, June 2006, p. 5.

6 William Byrd, *Lessons from Afghanistan's History for the Current Transition and Beyond,* Special Report 314, Washington DC, US Institute of Peace, September 2012, p. 3.

a reputation for isolation and xenophobia,[7] and united resistance when under threat of foreign invasion.[8] The latter was particularly effective in 1842 when a British military venture into Afghanistan was defeated by tribal warriors who were able temporarily to put longstanding internal disputes to one side.[9]

Looking 'more like a tribal confederacy than a cohesive nation-state',[10] a non-aligned Afghanistan enjoyed 'its longest interval of peace and internal stability' between 1929 and 1978.[11] It was not a 'visible player' on either the regional or world stages until the 1950s, when a new 'Great Game' emerged in the form of the Cold War between superpowers the US and the Soviet Union.[12] Careful diplomacy enabled Afghanistan to receive funds, infrastructure and prestige from both Cold War adversaries under unique 'informal rules of coexistence, [with] each [superpower] supporting different institutions and parts of the country',[13] although the US did cede most of the defence and development sectors to the Soviets.[14] Afghanistan also came to note during this period for again disputing the Durand Line, the border between it and Pakistan.[15] The line was a 19th century British construct that divided Pashtu tribal areas in British India from Afghanistan. The dispute, along with Afghanistan's opposition to Pakistan's post-partition admission to the UN, and Afghan calls for parts of Pakistan to be separated to form a homeland for Pashtuns ('Pashtunistan'), would have serious repercussions that will be addressed later in this paper.

Controversy within Afghanistan over a series of cultural reforms and political intrigue led to a bloodless coup in 1973, and then a bloody communist coup in 1978. The Marxist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) initiated policies that sparked widespread rural uprisings, initiating an Islamic-led insurgency and mutinies among some Afghan military units. The PDPA's grip on power faltered, its

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7 Barfield, *Afghanistan*, p. 206.

8 Weinbaum, *Afghanistan and Its Neighbors,* p. 1.

9 The first Anglo-Afghan War lasted from 1839 to 1842. The British lost over 4,000 soldiers and 12,000 camp followers when they retreated from Afghanistan, with only one survivor escaping capture or death.

10 Nasser Saghafi-Ameri, *Prospects for Peace and Stability in Afghanistan*, Stockholm, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, June 2011, p. 7.

11 Barfield, *Afghanistan*, p. 169.

12 Weinbaum, *Afghanistan and Its Neighbors,* p. 2.

13 Barnett R. Rubin, 'Saving Afghanistan', *Foreign Affairs,* Vol. 86, No. 1, January/February 2007, p. 64.

14 Weinbaum, *Afghanistan and Its Neighbors*, p. 4.

15 Afghanistan first raised its opposition in 1947.

elites were 'trapped in internecine violence'[16] and potential emerged for Pakistan's annexure of Afghan Pashtun lands.[17] The Soviet Union reluctantly moved into Afghanistan in late 1979 in an attempt to render 'internationalist assistance to the friendly Afghan people … [and to] create favourable conditions to prevent possible anti-Afghan actions on the part of the bordering states'.[18] Soviet and Afghan authorities implemented ambitious, ideologically-driven social and economic reforms but they were accompanied by widespread torture, executions and PDPA infighting.[19] The insurgency intensified as new groups, particularly Islamic *mujahideen*, rallied against the foreign invader. Islam was the 'foundational element of resistance'.[20]

During the course of the 1980s, the *mujahideen* received arms, training and financing from a host of nations including the US, Pakistan, Iran and China. The reasons for this support varied, including a desire by local powers for Soviet withdrawal from the region to a desire by the US to inflict a strategic defeat on its Cold War adversary.[21]

Despite spending over US$45 billion[22] and losing up to 26,000 soldiers,[23] the Soviets were unable to successfully repress the insurgency. Facing internal political crises at home and having endured a long and difficult campaign, Soviet forces withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989. The withdrawal was not accompanied by a meaningful peace settlement and, as a consequence, widespread violence continued between PDPA and *mujahideen* forces.[24] The PDPA was able to retain control of most urban areas until early 1992 when Russian financial aid ceased.[25] Within weeks, the PDPA dissolved and its factions joined competing *mujahideen* groups 'mostly on the basis of

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16 Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: the story of the Afghan warlords*, Maryborough, Pan Books, 2001, p. 13.

17 Seth G. Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires: America's war in Afghanistan*, New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 2010, p. 17.

18 Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires*, p. 18.

19 Byrd, *Lessons from Afghanistan's History*, pp. 6-7.

20 William Maley, *Rescuing Afghanistan*, Sydney, UNSW Press, 2006, p. 8.

21 The motives for these nations will be discussed in more detail in Part Two.

22 Rashid, *Taliban*, p. 18.

23 The Russian Government initially indicated that around 14,000 soldiers died. Subsequent reporting indicates that the real figure was around 26,000: see Paul Dibb, 'The Soviet Experience in Afghanistan: lessons to be learned?', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 64, No. 5, November 2010, pp. 500-1.

24 Byrd, *Lessons from Afghanistan's History*, p. 8.

25 The Soviet Union, or the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, was formally dissolved in December 1991. Russia was recognised as its legal successor.

ethnicity or regional affiliations'.[26] Warlordism emerged, generating even more vicious cycles of fighting, corruption, anarchy and commercial paralysis.[27] The subsequent nihilistic civil war virtually destroyed the Afghan state.

In this environment, where 'legitimacy was conferred by the ability to take power, defeat rivals and provide peace and security', the group to emerge triumphant was the Taliban.[28] Formed in 1994 by Pashtu religious students from southern Afghanistan (many schooled in Pakistan), the Taliban were 'motley, pathogenic, [and] anti-modernist',[29] 'deeply disillusioned with the factionalism and criminal activities of the Afghan *mujahideen* leadership' and intent on restoring a 'purer' form of Islam.[30] With the active support of Pakistan, the Taliban used brutal tactics to quickly seize control of a majority of the country. In September 1996, they proclaimed themselves as the government of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

Deeply fundamentalist and conservative in outlook, 'poorly educated ... [and] with far less experience in foreign relations than previous Afghan regimes,'[31] the Taliban imposed systems of justice that were criticised as oppressive. Highly secretive in nature, the Taliban Government made several decisions that soon raised the ire of neighbouring nations and other international actors.[32] Diplomatically shunned by all but a handful of nations (such as Pakistan and Saudi Arabia), and subject to ongoing UN sanctions, the Taliban sought and attracted like-minded fundamentalist groups, such as Osama Bin Laden's al-Qaeda. Already with a presence in Afghanistan and independently wealthy, Bin Laden's group was embraced by the Taliban as an 'economic benefactor in the absence of international legitimacy'.[33] With al-Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan, the Taliban continued fighting opposition warlords in the nation's north (the so-called Northern Alliance).[34] The degree of stability brought to Afghanistan by the Taliban was relative, brief and stained by 'continuing violations of international humanitarian law and of human rights'[35] and questionable

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26 Barfield, *Afghanistan*, p. 171.
27 Weinbaum, *Afghanistan and Its Neighbors,* p. 5.
28 Byrd, *Lessons from Afghanistan's History*, p. 3.
29 Maley, *Rescuing Afghanistan*, p. 9.
30 Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires*, p. 58.
31 Barfield, *Afghanistan*, p. 263.
32 Rashid, *Taliban*, p. 5.
33 Steven Simon and Jonathan Stevenson, 'Afghanistan: how much is enough?', *Survival: global politics and strategy*, Vol. 51, No. 5, 28 September 2009, p. 48.
34 Officially known as the United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan.
35 UN Security Council, *Security Council Resolution 1333 (2000)*, New York, UN, 19 December 2000, p. 2.

strategic decisions such as harbouring al-Qaeda. This notwithstanding, in early September 2001 the head of the Northern Alliance was killed by al-Qaeda operatives and total Taliban victory seemed imminent. Within a few months of 9/11, however, the Taliban would be evicted from power by the Northern Alliance and other warlords, in an operation coordinated and funded by the US.

Western intervention in Afghanistan - 2001 to 2013

On 20 September 2001, nine days after al-Qaeda's 9/11 attacks in the US, President George W. Bush addressed a joint session of the US Congress, saying:

> Our grief has turned to anger, and anger to resolution. Whether we bring our enemies to justice, or bring justice to our enemies, justice will be done.[36]

Bush criticised the Taliban for sponsoring, sheltering and suppling terrorists. His demands included the Taliban handing over al-Qaeda's leaders and closing their Afghan camps, adding that:

> These demands are not open to negotiation or discussion. The Taliban must act, and act immediately. They will hand over the terrorists, or they will share in their fate.[37]

The Taliban rejected Bush's demands and President Bush initiated a global 'War on Terror', which he defined 'as a military matter, not a police one'.[38] On 7 October, the US commenced military operations in Afghanistan (Operation ENDURING FREEDOM), utilising a mix of special forces, air strikes and intelligence operatives who 'provided money to buy—or at least rent—the loyalty of local [Afghan] commanders and their militia forces'.[39] This combination proved decisive: by the end of 2011, Taliban and al-Qaeda forces, and their leadership, were either dead or had fled to remote parts of eastern Afghanistan and neighbouring Pakistan.

The swiftness of initial military actions was mirrored diplomatically when, in December 2001, the UN held a conference in Bonn, Germany, to 'end the tragic conflict in Afghanistan and promote national reconciliation, lasting peace, stability

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36 Bush, 'Address to the Joint Session of the 107th Congress', pp. 65 and 68.

37 Bush, 'Address to the Joint Session of the 107th Congress', pp. 65 and 68.

38 Karsten Friis, 'Which Afghanistan? Military, Humanitarian, and State-Building Identities in the Afghan Theatre', *Security Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 2, 2012, p. 278.

39 Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires*, p. 91.

and respect for human rights in the country.'[40] This 'Bonn Process' mapped the way to implement a central Afghan government,[41] with Western nations assuming responsibility for oversighting the creation of aspects of governance and state capacity.[42] Later, President Bush called Afghanistan the 'ultimate nation building mission'.[43]

Early progress was promising with the December 2001 formation of an interim administration, headed by previously-exiled Pashtu leader, Hamid Karzai, and the adoption of a constitution in January 2004.[44] Karzai won the Presidential election in October 2004 and elections for the National Assembly were held in September 2005. The formation of a Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRoA) seemed to indicate that Afghanistan was 'making considerable political progress … however, by 2004, a broad insurgency threatened to engulf the country'.[45] While the Taliban and al-Qaeda had been quickly routed in late 2001, they had not been defeated. Operation ENDURING FREEDOM forces were supported by 'friendly' Afghan warlords and a nascent Afghan National Security Force (ANSF) of soldiers and police. Oversighting and facilitating the establishment of ANSF were thousands of Western (coalition) personnel who deployed as part of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), a NATO mission. Non-NATO nations also deployed personnel to complement ISAF.

The growing complexity of the Afghanistan situation became apparent both on and off the battlefields. Unable to win conventional battles, the Taliban switched to terrorist tactics, such as suicide bombings and targeted assassinations against coalition forces, GIRoA personnel and aid workers. These attacks 'undermined confidence in the government and the coalition',[46] as did the political efforts of the Taliban in appealing to the traditional sense of opposition towards foreigners. In many areas, the Taliban implemented shadow systems of governance, a parallel

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40 UN, 'Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-Establishment of Permanent Government Institutions, UN website, 2001, available at: <http://www.un.org/News/dh/latest/afghan/afghan-agree.htm>, accessed 23 May 2013.

41 Friis, 'Which Afghanistan?', p. 291.

42 Germany was allocated responsibility for developing the police system, the US for the military, Italy for the justice system and Great Britain for counter-narcotics.

43 George W. Bush, *Decision Points*, St. Ives PLC, Virgin Books, 2010, p. 205.

44 The interim administration was succeeded by the Afghan Transitional Authority in mid-2002.

45 Tom Lansford, *9/11 and the Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq: a chronology and reference guide*, Santa Barbara, ABC-CLIO, 2011, p. 139.

46 Lansford, *9/11 and the Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq*, p. 142.

state issuing taxes and running courts regarded 'as more effective and fair than the corrupt official system'.[47] Further complicating matters was growing democratic opposition towards President Karzai, and tensions between him (whose power base lay in the capital of Kabul) and regional warlords seeking to reassert their control over their tribal areas.[48] Some resented Kabul's programs to eradicate opium poppies, a significant source of income for many warlords (and the Taliban).[49] These tensions were symptomatic of the broader schism emerging from the imposition of a highly-centralised presidential system of governance that was supported mainly by the international community and the Kabul elite that ran it.[50] Karzai's early requests for the US to disempower warlords were not acted on.[51] The Bush Administration's attention 'quickly wandered off to Iraq and grand visions of transforming the Middle East'.[52] With minimal resources of his own, Karzai was forced to strike a number of deals with warlords and powerbrokers that ran contrary to the principles of transparent governance. These deals helped cement Karzai's power base but they also began to erode international confidence in him.[53]

At a strategic level, coalition military operations were hampered by a limited availability of personnel and equipment, in large part the result of the US focus on Iraq.[54] In the false belief that the insurgency had been mostly defeated, ISAF assumed lead responsibility for security throughout Afghanistan in 2005/2006.[55] This coincided with significant increases in violence arising from dissatisfaction with Afghan government corruption, a lack of an effective ANSF presence in many locations, the reticence of some NATO contributors to fight the insurgents, and the safe-havens enjoyed by militants in Pakistan.[56]

Although a notional ally of the US in the 'War on Terror', Pakistan proved incapable or unwilling to remove or destroy many insurgent bases, for reasons discussed

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47 Rubin, 'Saving Afghanistan', p. 60.

48 Lansford, *9/11 and the Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq*, pp. 142-3.

49 Lansford, *9/11 and the Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq*, p. 140.

50 Barfield, *Afghanistan*, p. 303.

51 Vanda Felbab-Brown, 'Slip-Sliding on a Yellow Brick Road: stabilization efforts in Afghanistan', *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development,* Vol. 1, No. 1, 2012, available at: <http://www.stabilityjournal.org/article/view/sta.af/19>, accessed 1 May 2013.

52 Rubin, 'Saving Afghanistan', p. 58.

53 Lansford, *9/11 and the Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq*, p. 146.

54 Saghafi-Ameri, *Prospects for Peace and Stability in Afghanistan*, p. 3.

55 Kenneth Katzman, *Afghanistan: post-Taliban governance, security, and US policy,* Washington DC, Congressional Research Service, 9 April 2013, p. 18.

56 Katzman, *Afghanistan,* p. 18.

below. In response to this situation, the US commenced so-called drone attacks[57] into Pakistan in 2004[58] and later undertook some military raids. Pakistan bitterly protested publicly the violation of its sovereignty but tacitly tolerated the attacks as some insurgents had begun to target the Pakistani state.[59]

By 2008, the insurgency had spread throughout Afghanistan and had evolved beyond a Taliban-centric struggle to become:

> [a] mix of Islamist factions, power-hungry warlords, criminals and tribal groupings all pursuing their own economic, political, criminal and social agendas and interests, from local feuds to establishing a pan-Islamic caliphate.[60]

Coalition forces utilised a counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy designed to alienate insurgents from the local population.[61] Despite the presence of extra forces, and a dramatic growth in size of the ANSF, a 2009 review by the ISAF Commander found that the overall situation was deteriorating, with neither success nor failure guaranteed.[62] There was also widespread international and domestic criticism of the progress of state-building initiatives and the ability of GIRoA to provide effective governance. Even the new US President, Barack Obama, was openly critical—GIRoA had, in his opinion, 'been hampered by corruption, the drug trade, an under-developed economy, and insufficient security forces'.[63]

With international and domestic disillusionment in the Afghan war growing, a consensus developed that the way forward was to transfer responsibility for security

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57 A 'drone' is the popular culture name for unmanned aerial vehicles; remotely-piloted aircraft used predominantly for surveillance purposes (although some can fire missiles).

58 Nic Robertson and Greg Botelho, 'Ex-Pakistani President Musharraf Admits Secret Deal with US on Drone Strikes', 12 April 2013, CNN, available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/04/11/world/asia/pakistan-musharraf-drones>, accessed 7 July 2013.

59 Lansford, *9/11 and the Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq*, p. 142.

60 House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, *The UK's Foreign Policy Approach to Afghanistan and Pakistan: Fourth Report of Session 2010-11*, Vol. 1, London, House of Commons, 9 February 2011, p. 51.

61 Friis, 'Which Afghanistan?', p. 279.

62 Stanley McChrystal, 'Commander's Initial Assessment', Kabul, US Department of Defense, 30 August 2009, p. 1-1, available at: <http://media.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/documents/Assessment_Redacted_092109.pdf>, accessed 23 May 2013.

63 Barack Obama, 'Remarks by the President in Address to the nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan', Address by the President of the United States of America, 1 December 2009, available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-address-nation-way-forward-afghanistan-and-pakistan>, accessed 7 May 2013.

from the coalition to Afghan forces, a shift codified at the strategic level as the process of 'Transition'[64] or '*Inteqal*'.[65] President Karzai initiated discussions in November 2009 and NATO agreed that the transition would be a conditions-based process implemented by the end of 2014. Reinforcing this development, in December 2009 President Obama enunciated his objectives in Afghanistan: deny al-Qaeda a safe haven; reverse the Taliban's momentum and deny it the ability to overthrow the government; and, strengthen the capacity of Afghanistan's security forces to take the lead.[66] These were to be achieved by a temporary surge of additional military forces,[67] along with more support and capacity development resources in areas such as education, health, media and the ANSF.[68] Significantly, Obama highlighted that success in Afghanistan was 'inextricably linked'[69] to the US's partnership with Pakistan, as the insurgency had spread to both sides of the Afghan/Pakistan border.

Efforts to harness Pakistan as a 'robust counter-terrorism partner' subsequently came to be judged unsuccessful.[70] US drone strikes and other cross-border operations continued apace. A significant moment occurred in May 2011 when Osama Bin Laden was killed in a US raid in Abbottabad, Pakistan.[71] That episode, along with the death of 24 Pakistani soldiers in a fire-fight with US forces at the Afghan/Pakistan border in December 2011, provoked serious repercussions, with Pakistan closing the border, thus preventing the coalition using the shortest logistical supply routes. Ramifications of this deterioration in relations will be analysed later.

On 18 June 2013, the ANSF assumed full responsibility for leading all security activities throughout the nation, with reducing numbers of coalition forces providing mentoring and training support. The conditions-based approach to transition appears to have been replaced by a time-line driven process,[72] although

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64 Catherine Dale, *Next Steps in the War in Afghanistan? Issues for Congress*, Washington DC, Congressional Research Service, 15 June 2012, p. 6.

65 *Inteqal* is the Dari and Pashtu word for transition.

66 Obama, December 2009 'Address on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan'.

67 The surge of 33,000 US troops took total numbers of US personnel in Afghanistan to just over 100,000.

68 Ahmed Rashid, *Pakistan on the Brink: the future of America, Pakistan and Afghanistan*, Waseca, Minnesota, Viking, 2012, p. xvii.

69 Obama, December 2009 'Address on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan'.

70 Simon and Stevenson, 'Afghanistan', p. 48.

71 Abbottabad is to the north-northeast of Pakistan's capital, Islamabad.

72 Dale, *Next Steps in the War in Afghanistan?*, pp. 6-7.

planning for the civil side of the transition remains unclear,[73] as does the precise role and size of the West's commitment post-2014. International aid has been promised but there are concerns that it will be insufficient and used in a largely uncoordinated manner. There are significant doubts about the resilience of Afghanistan's economy and political system to withstand the financial and security implications of the transition. A political agreement has not yet been reached between GIRoA and the Taliban. Of critical importance in determining the future will be the election of a new Afghan President in April 2014,[74] the policies of that person and his[75] government, along with the policies of neighbouring nations and the US.

Part Two – Why They Do What They Do

This part discusses and analyses the drivers for the international relations policies and approaches of the regional actors that will most impact on Afghanistan into the future. This includes the US and Afghanistan itself.

Afghanistan – inside the cauldron

GIRoA is attempting to reach a normalised state of international relations with its neighbours, at the very time it is engaged in a seemingly existential struggle against the Taliban and other insurgents. In doing this, GIRoA is very much engaged in balancing the competing interests and needs of the nation against outside powers. This is being done on the understanding that the ruling elite's primary objective is to protect itself.

Before the 1970s, Afghanistan enjoyed a significant degree of stability from its isolationist leanings, while occupying the role of being a buffer state between the interests of larger powers. The country has long been a playground for the interests of various regional and international powers. The year 1979 marked the beginning of a period where the international community abandoned a post-British unwritten

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73 NATO Defence College, 'The NATO Mission in Afghanistan Post-2014: the transformation decade', Conference Report, Rome, September 2012, p. 2., available at: <http://www.ndc.nato.int/research/publications.php?icode=6>, accessed 6 May 2013

74 The Afghan constitution prevents any President from standing for a third consecutive term.

75 Although theoretically possible, because of cultural issues it is extremely unlikely that a woman would contest the 2014 election.

agreement of non-intervention in Afghan affairs.[76] Forty years of violence and international intrigue has made it increasingly unlikely, even impossible, for Afghanistan to return to an isolationist stance. The nation now has unprecedented degrees of social contact with the world, the population is increasingly politicised if not militarised, and it is urbanising at one of the fastest rates in Asia (6 per cent per year).[77] The nation's traditional subsistence economy is breaking down and international aid is crucial to fund key government operations (particularly the provision of security).

Afghanistan's *Constitution* states that the nation's foreign policy objectives include 'preserving the independence, national interests and territorial integrity, as well as non-interference, good neighbourliness, mutual respect and equality of rights'.[78] GIRoA aims to achieve this through regional cooperation, as well as conveying two core messages to the international community: Afghanistan wants to be an equal partner and it also wants to be a catalyst for regional cooperation.[79] Notable developments have included improving relationships with Iran, China, the Central Asian Republics (CARs) and India. A key focus has been obtaining aid and funding commitments from the international community. GIRoA's commitment to achieving a negotiated settlement with the Taliban has been seemingly constant although President Karzai distrusts the insurgents,[80] particularly after they rejected offers of senior cabinet positions in 2007.[81] The June 2013 dispute and heated protests by President Karzai towards Taliban/US talks in Qatar, demonstrates the delicate nature

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76 Barnett R. Rubin, 'The Transformation of the Afghan State', in J. Alexander Thier (ed.), *The Future of Afghanistan*, Washington DC, US Institute of Peace, 2009, p. 14.

77 'Afghanistan Millennium Development Goals: progress at a glance', UN Development Programme Afghanistan website, available at: <http://www.undp.org.af/MDGs/AfghanMDGs-ProgressataGlance.pdf>, accessed 23 June 2013.

78 Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, *The Constitution of Afghanistan*, Kabul, Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, January 2004, Article 8, Chapter 1.

79 Embassy of Afghanistan New Delhi, 'Afghanistan's Foreign Policy', Embassy of Afghanistan New Delhi website, available at: <http://en.afghanembassy.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=19%3Aafghanistans-foreign-policy&Itemid=52>, accessed 23 June 2013.

80 In June 2013, Karzai strongly opposed negotiations between US and Taliban representatives in Qatar, citing the Taliban's use of a flag and a plaque declaring the building to be a quasi-embassy: see Ahmad Jamshid, 'Angry Karzai Throws Taliban Peace Talks into Jeopardy', Thespec.com website, 19 June 2013, available at: <http://www.thespec.com/news-story/3847699-angry-karzai-throws-taliban-peace-talks-into-jeopardy/>, accessed 23 June 2013.

81 Lansford, *9/11 and the Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq*, p. 141.

of potential negotiations. In that matter, Karzai appeared more concerned about the behind-the-scenes role of Pakistan as he was about protocol irregularities.[82]

The international relations issue that attracts most intensity and fickleness is the relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Within Afghanistan, there are 'deeply ingrained popular feelings of resentment ... [against] a neighbour perceived as covetous'.[83] Since 2003, there have been periodic border skirmishes between the two and the discovery of Osama Bin Laden inside Pakistan seemed to validate GIRoA's vociferous concerns about Pakistan harbouring terrorists. The degree of distrust is such that in July 2013, the head of the Afghan National Army stated that the insurgency could end within weeks if Pakistan told the Taliban to stop.[84] Despite this, in October 2011, President Karzai said that Afghanistan would side with Pakistan if it fought a war with the US, as Pakistan was 'a brother country'.[85]

There is clearly a significant degree of complexity to the Afghan/Pakistan relationship. Afghan foreign policy objectives may vary from, or complicate, the interests of the US and the ISAF coalition. This has attracted strident criticism, particularly from US commentators and officials. Much of this criticism fails to take into account the domestic pressures on GIRoA leadership and that, arguably, in large part (but not totally) the Afghan national identity has historically been defined by resistance to foreign incursions.[86] There are shifting power balances and communal views within a country exhausted by war.

A 2012 survey conducted by The Asia Foundation found that 52 per cent of respondents believed that Afghanistan is moving in the right direction, up from 46 per cent in 2011.[87] Insecurity, unemployment and corruption are the three biggest

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82 Simbal Khan, 'What's really bothering Hamid Karzai?', 26 June 2013, *Foreign Policy* website, available at: <http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/06/26/whats_eating_hamid_karzai>, accessed 1 July 2013.

83 Marvin G. Weinbaum and Haseeb Humayoon, 'The Intertwined Destinies of Afghanistan and Pakistan', in Thier, *The Future of Afghanistan*, p. 103.

84 BBC News World, ''Pakistan Controls Taliban' – Afghan Army Chief', 3 July 2013, available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-23159095>, accessed 7 July 2013.

85 Ewan MacAskill and Declan Walsh, 'Hamid Karzai Claims on TV his Country 'Will Side With Pakistan if US Attacks'', *The Guardian*, 24 October 2011, available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/oct/23/hamid-karzai-us-pakistan-afghanistan>, accessed 7 July 2013.

86 Byrd, *Lessons from Afghanistan's History*, p. 2.

87 Mohammad Tariq, Fazel Haqbeen and Palwasha Kakar, *Afghanistan in 2012: a survey of the Afghan people*, Kabul, The Asia Foundation, 2012, p. 5.

concerns to Afghans,[88] although over half of respondents stated that their families are more prosperous today than they were in the Taliban era.[89] These results tend to support assessments by some commentators that most Afghans want the US to leave but they are divided on the issue of wanting a peace settlement with the Taliban; while the Pashtuns are generally supportive, the majority of the rest of the nation are not.[90] The Afghan economy is in much better shape in 2013 than it was during and after the Soviet period but international aid and investment has underpinned progress.[91] The World Bank projects that Afghanistan will need to rely on international funding to pay almost all of the nation's security costs for the next ten years,[92] a period of time during which government expenditure is projected to exceed 43 per cent of the nation's gross domestic product.[93] Development progress since 2001 has been mixed, with marked gains in education, basic health and mortality rates, yet a third of the population remains below the poverty line.[94] These facts and projections, along with the evolving views of the Afghan population, emphasise the need for GIRoA to pursue international relations policies that best enable it to develop, primarily through stabilising and growing the nation's economy.

Pakistan – the intrusive neighbour

Of the six nations surrounding Afghanistan, Pakistan continues to have the greatest influence in determining Afghanistan's (and through that regional) stability.[95] Pakistan 'has a vibrant civil society'[96] but it is 'unstable ... and the most vulnerable to terrorist violence, political change, or economic collapse'.[97] For over 30 years, Pakistan's policies towards Afghanistan have been generated 'through the lens of

88 Tariq, Haqbeen and Kakar, *Afghanistan in 2012*, p. 5.
89 Tariq, Haqbeen and Kakar, *Afghanistan in 2012*, p. 6.
90 Rashid, *Pakistan on the Brink*, p. 15.
91 Byrd, *Lessons from Afghanistan's History*, p. 2.
92 Richard Hogg, Claudia Nassif, Camilo Gomez Osorio, William Byrd and Andrew Beath, *Afghanistan in Transition: looking beyond 2014*, Washington DC, The World Bank, 2013, p. 11.
93 Hogg *et al*., *Afghanistan in Transition*, p. 9.
94 Hogg *et al*., *Afghanistan in Transition*, p. 1.
95 Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, China, Pakistan and Iran.
96 Peter Bergen, 'After the Withdrawal: the way forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan', Address to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, 19 March 2013, available at: <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA13/20130319/100524/HHRG-113-FA13-Wstate-BergenP-20130319.pdf>, accessed 6 May 2013, p. 2.
97 Rashid, *Pakistan on the Brink*, pp. 11-2.

Pakistan's focus on the Indo-Pakistan rivalry'.[98] For Islamabad, India represents an existential threat.[99] Islamabad has therefore worked to ensure that Afghanistan remains either supportive towards it, or at the very least, indifferent towards India.

Pakistan's 1947 separation from India was a turbulent process marred by significant violence and destruction. Although its military is outsized by the Indian Army, between 1947 and 1999, Pakistan engaged in three conventional armed conflicts and one undeclared conflict.[100] These conflicts deepened mutual mistrust and suspicion. In the 1971 war, Pakistan was humiliated when East Pakistan declared its independence after receiving significant Indian military assistance.[101] Border and other disputes continue to dominate interstate relations, particularly in the Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) region. Pakistan's 1972 decision to acquire nuclear weapons is believed to be linked to the loss of East Pakistan, and a desire to deter India's nuclear arsenal, as well as to augment Pakistan's conventional forces—so concerned is Pakistan with the Indian threat.[102]

Pakistan society is not heterogeneous and several groups have argued (both politically and at times violently) for independence from this evolved nation state. Furthermore, many Pashtu tribal areas along the nation's border with Afghanistan have been politically autonomous, and the presence of large numbers of Afghan refugees in Pakistan causes societal tensions. Adding to domestic turbulence, democratic civilian and military dictatorial rule have alternated since 1947. The military is generally regarded as being Pakistan's only effective national institution and 'in Pakistani politics it is critical to have the army on your side'.[103] Consequently,

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98 Byrd, *Lessons from Afghanistan's History*, p. 5.

99 Larry Hanaeuer and Peter Chalk, 'India's and Pakistan's Strategies in Afghanistan: implications for the United States and the region', Occasional Paper, Santa Monica, Rand Center for Asia Pacific Policy, 2012, available at: <http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/occasional_papers/2012/RAND_OP387.pdf>, accessed 9 May 2013, p. ix.

100 Conventional conflicts were in 1948 (in J&K: the Pakistan Army only became officially involved in May 1948; before then, a collection of pro-Pakistan forces were fighting the Indian Army), 1965 (relating to J&K), 1971 (over East Pakistan/Bangladesh) and the undeclared war that occurred in the Kargil area of J&K in 1999.

101 Bangladesh had been known as East Pakistan until 1971.

102 Paul K. Kerr and Mary Beth Nikitin, *Pakistan's Nuclear Weapons: proliferation and security issues*, Washington DC, Congressional Research Service, 19 March 2013, p. 3.

103 Claude Rakisits, 'Can Nawaz Sharif Make Peace with the Taliban?', 13 May 2013, Real Clear World website, available at: <http://www.realclearworld.com/articles/2013/05/13/can_nawaz_sharif_make_peace_with_the_taliban_105157.html>, accessed 14 May 2013.

the military and its views have been extremely influential in shaping Pakistan's foreign policy.

Pakistan's actions and ambitions in Afghanistan have been further shaped by the former's attempts to enter into alliances with the US and China. These efforts have been problematic as the parties have sought different objectives. Whereas Pakistan seeks an insurance policy to counter Indian aggression, between the 1950s and 1991, the US regarded Pakistan as another pawn in its Cold War containment policy against the Soviet Union.[104] Pakistan lost its strategic value when the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan, and only regained it after 9/11.[105] In the interim, the US suspended military assistance as a result of Pakistani human rights violations and nuclear weapons testing. Those actions added to historic Pakistani bitterness towards the US, arising from a lack of tangible American support in Pakistan's 1965 and 1971 wars with India.[106] Pakistan's dealings with China, characterised as an 'all-weather' relationship, has actually been a 'marriage of convenience' which Pakistan needs more than China.[107] China has not always supported Pakistan's actions and has rejected at least one offer by Pakistan (in 1972) for a formal military alliance. This history of conditional alliances and doubtful insurance policies has influenced Pakistan's Afghan policies.

The relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan has been periodically poisoned since 1947.[108] Afghanistan was the only nation to oppose Pakistan's entry into the UN; it disputed their border and it demanded the return of Pakistan's Pashtun lands or their conversion into an independent Pashtunistan.[109] The political inclinations and actions of the PDPA regime, along with the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, were contradictory to Pakistan's national interests.

The Soviet invasion gave Pakistan the opportunity to be both useful to the US and to influence future Afghan leaders. This was at a time when Pakistan's military

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104 Claude Rakisits, 'Pakistan-US Bilateral Relations: a difficult road ahead', *Australian Defence Force Journal*, Issue 183, 2010, p. 18

105 Rakisits, 'Pakistan-US Bilateral Relations', p. 19.

106 Ironically, India was also angered by US (in)action during both conflicts: see Bruce Riedel, *Avoiding Armageddon: America, India, and Pakistan to the brink and back*, India, HarperCollins, 2013, pp. 68 and 78.

107 Claude Rakisits, 'Pakistan-China Bilateral Relations 2001-2011: a deepening but cautious partnership', *Security Challenges*, Vol. 8, No. 3, Spring 2012, p. 83.

108 Barfield, *Afghanistan*, p. 209.

109 Barfield, *Afghanistan*, pp. 208-9.

dictator, General Zia-ul Haq sponsored an Islamisation of the nation, particularly in the areas of the economy, judicial reform, the Islamic penal code and educational policies.[110] Pakistan was the scene for the training, equipping and basing of many anti-Soviet *mujahideen* fighters, efforts funded by nations such as the US, China and Saudi Arabia. Close links were forged between the *mujahideen* and Pakistan's military, particularly the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) organisation. With many of its operating officers being Pashtuns, the ISI became the 'focal point of the anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan'.[111] When President Zia-ul Haq was subsequently able to loosen the conditions the US placed on their funds for the *mujahideen*, the ISI used the monies to expand and become Pakistan's 'most powerful and intrusive political player'.[112]

After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, the ISI focused on supporting Islamic causes and exploiting opportunities to damage Indian interests in Kashmir and other locations.[113] Although it has been denied by Pakistani authorities, such as former President Pervez Musharraf,[114] it is generally accepted that the ISI was instrumental in the formative phases of the rise of the Taliban.[115] Pakistani support continued even when Taliban Afghanistan became a pariah state within the region:

> The degree to which Pakistan has been prepared to go toward installing cooperative regimes can be measured by the political price it was willing to pay for its backing of the Taliban. The policy poisoned Islamabad's relationship with Iran, the Central Asian republics, and Russia. It also created serious complications with other countries, including its traditional ally China.[116]

The support gave Pakistan 'strategic depth', something it had sought since the aftermath of its 1971 war with India. Strategic depth is a concept in which Afghanistan is an ally of or at least friendly towards Pakistan, at the expense of India. At a time when India was providing support to a separatist movement within

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110 Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis, *Whither Pakistan: growing instability and implications for India*, New Delhi, IDSA, 2010, p. 62.

111 Shuja Nawaz, *Crossed Swords: Pakistan, its Army, and the wars within*, Pakistan, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 374.

112 Rashid, *Pakistan on the Brink*, p. 48.

113 Nawaz, *Crossed Swords*, p. 467.

114 Pervez Musharraf, *In the Line of Fire: a memoir*, New York, Free Press, 2006, p. 211.

115 For an account of the assistance provided by Pakistan during this period see: Rashid, *Taliban*, pp. 17-30.

116 Weinbaum, *Afghanistan and Its Neighbors*, p. 9.

Pakistan's Baluchistan province, a sense of strategic depth assuaged concerns in Islamabad.[117]

Western intervention in 2001 complicated Pakistan's ambitions towards Afghanistan and the Taliban. Immediately after 9/11, the US delivered a 'blatant ultimatum'[118] demanding Pakistan's unconditional support, as well as ending its support for the Taliban and al-Qaeda.[119] Pakistani President Musharraf agreed but unsuccessfully attempted to link it to US support on the Kashmir dispute.[120] Since 2001, Pakistan has been roundly criticised as a reluctant ally, being 'unwilling or incapable, or both, of taking action against Afghan insurgent safe havens' inside Pakistan.[121] It is claimed that in 2003, it was the ISI that helped the Taliban to restart their insurgency in Afghanistan, while at the same time it assisted the US by capturing or killing leading members of al-Qaeda.[122]

In recent years, Islamabad's ambitions and goals in Afghanistan have become tremendously complicated with the spread of the insurgency inside Pakistan's borders. Taliban elements in Pakistan have encouraged and influenced local likeminded groups to challenge Islamabad's legitimacy. Events such as the 2008 reinstitution of democracy in Pakistan, combat operations between Pakistan's military and insurgents, and rising Pakistani anger over the issue of sovereignty arising from US drone strikes, have created additional complexities between nominal allies. While the impact of these events on interstate relations will be discussed more fully below, Pakistan's continued support for the Afghan Taliban illustrates that elements of Pakistan's leadership and military have not significantly departed from the fundamental historic tenet of the nation's Afghanistan policy *vis-á-vis* the search for strategic depth. In the words of Hanaeuer and Chalk, 'so long as India is viewed as an existential threat, and so long as the military plays a central role in setting Pakistani policy, it is unlikely that there will be a fundamental shift in this policy bias'.[123]

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117 Hanaeuer and Chalk, *India's and Pakistan's Strategies in Afghanistan,* p. ix.
118 Musharraf, *In the Line of Fire*, p. 201.
119 Musharraf, *In the Line of Fire*, pp. 204-5.
120 Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires*, pp. 88-9.
121 Dale, *Next Steps in the War in Afghanistan?*, p. 13.
122 Rashid, *Pakistan on the Brink*, p. 21.
123 Hanaeuer and Chalk, *India's and Pakistan's Strategies in Afghanistan,* p. ix.

India – a rising regional hegemon?

India 'clearly perceives' itself to be the leader of the South Asian region.[124] India's 'fundamental goal' in Afghanistan is to prevent that nation 'from being used as a base for Pakistani-supported extremists to launch terrorist attacks in India or against Indian interests'.[125] Afghanistan has been a 'theatre for Indo-Pakistani enmity', a product of the rivalry and mistrust that has dogged the history of both nations.[126] The issue of trade, however, is increasingly becoming intertwined with India's objectives in Afghanistan and its region.

Indian/Afghan relations have to be understood in the context of the former's post-colonial history and its sense of self (as well as the ongoing tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan). After British rule, India sought to maintain independence 'at all costs; it was never again going to be told what to do by a foreign power'.[127] India's body politic was 'primarily anti-imperialist and by extension, somewhat anti-Western in outlook'.[128] A democratic India pioneered the Non-Aligned Movement of nations yet, during the Cold War, it closely associated itself with the Soviet Union. New Delhi's security concerns have been dominated by its ongoing border disputes and conventional and unconventional conflicts with both Pakistan and China.[129] Indian suspicions of Western (imperial) interests in South Asia have been fuelled by the (albeit imperfect) relationship between the US and Pakistan, and by the perceived ambitions of a rising China. China has been and will remain 'a significant policy and security challenge for India. It is the one major power which impinges directly on India's geopolitical space'.[130]

Relations between India and Afghanistan were friendly between 1947 and 1978; Afghanistan's neutrality complemented India's non-aligned status and the two states

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124 Robert Stewart-Ingersoll and Derrick Frazier, 'India as a Regional Power: identifying the impact of roles and foreign policy orientation on the South Asian security order', *Asian Security*, Vol. 6, No. 1, p. 58.

125 Hanaeuer and Chalk, *India's and Pakistan's Strategies in Afghanistan*, p. 11.

126 Weinbaum, *Afghanistan and Its Neighbors,* p. 16.

127 Riedel, *Avoiding Armageddon*, p. 44.

128 Poorvi Chitalkar and David Malone, 'Democracy, Politics and India's Foreign Policy', *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 1, 13 June 2011, p. 78.

129 Stewart-Ingersoll and Frazier, 'India as a Regional Power', p. 58.

130 Sunil Khilnani, Rajiv Kumar, Pratap Bhanu Mehta, Prakash Menon, Nandan Nilekani, Srinath Raghavan, Shyam Saran and Siddath Varadarajan, *Nonalignment 2.0: a foreign and strategic policy for India in the twenty first century*, India, Centre for Policy Research, 2012, p. 13.

became members of the Non-Aligned Movement when it came into being in 1961.[131] Nonetheless, the degree to which India was indifferent towards the 'internal democratic credentials'[132] of other nations was highlighted with its 'thinly disguised'[133] endorsement of the pro-Soviet Afghan regimes of the 1970s and 1980s. India's position was in no small way influenced by increasing regional tensions arising from Pakistan's importance in anti-Soviet operations,[134] the military dictatorship of General Zia-ul Haq in Pakistan and his Islamisation of the Pakistan nation.[135] India was forced to rethink its Afghan engagement in the 1990s as a result of the 1989 Soviet withdrawal and the subsequent civil war, the end of the Cold War and the rise of the Taliban. By the end of the decade, India was providing support to the Northern Alliance. This was as much a response to counter Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan as it was an effort to oppose the Taliban.

Western intervention in Afghanistan coincided with significant domestic, security and geostrategic developments for India. Muslim terrorist attacks on the Indian Parliament in December 2001 and a series of bombings in Mumbai (culminating in the 2008 attack at the Taj Hotel and nearby areas), represented serious escalations in Indian/Pakistan tension, including the threat of interstate war.[136] At the same time, India had to respond to the fact that Pakistan and China were increasing their influence and presence in Afghanistan through a mix of cultural ties, aid and/or financial investments. Other significant drivers for India's recent foreign policy objectives in Afghanistan include: the impact of India's domestic financial liberalisation of the 1990s; the nation's increasing trade connectivity with the world; and the desire to source energy, markets and trade from areas such as Central Asia. These markets, however, require a stable corridor through Afghanistan and either Pakistan or Iran.

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131 Jorge Heine and Partha Gosh, 'The Elephant in the War: India and the Afghan-Pakistan link', *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 1, 13 June 2011, p. 55.

132 Chitalkar and Malone, 'Democracy, Politics and India's Foreign Policy', p. 83.

133 Weinbaum, *Afghanistan and Its Neighbors,* p. 16.

134 Heine and Gosh, 'The Elephant in the War', p. 56.

135 Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis, *Whither Pakistan*, pp. 61-2.

136 In each of these instances, the terrorists trained or staged in Pakistan, or were sponsored by Pakistani-based terrorist groups, or operated with the imprimatur of elements of Pakistan's security infrastructure, or were inspired by events relating to the Indian/Pakistani struggles.

Utilising a policy driven by the twin themes of stability and development,[137] India has pledged and begun to deliver in excess of two billion dollars of community-based aid in all of Afghanistan's 34 provinces.[138] India has provided limited training to the ANSF but it has not deployed combat forces as they would be targeted by Afghan militants. Such a deployment could embolden anti-Indian extremists in Kashmir.[139] This could also imperil a national Indian coalition government, particularly if there is no robust national consensus on the issue.[140] Significantly, India has undertaken considerable investment in nations surrounding Afghanistan in an attempt to enhance its regional status and counter that of Pakistan, although not all initiatives have been successful.[141] India spent millions, for example, in renovating a former Soviet air base in Tajikistan with a hope of establishing a permanent presence there. In 2011, however, the Tajik Government announced that India would not be allowed to use the facility for a combat aircraft squadron.[142] India has been far more successful in its relations with Iran in establishing a trade route into Afghanistan. India has spent over $100 million on developing the Iranian port of Chāh Bahār, including building rail and road connections to nearby Afghanistan.[143] Although it requires sea travel between Iran and India, Chāh Bahār gives India the potential to conduct trade with Afghanistan and the Central Asian region without the need to traverse Pakistan. Both Afghanistan and Iran are critical land bridges to India's trade aspirations in Central Asia but those nations must be stable and peaceful.[144]

India believes that an Afghanistan integrated into the region's political and economic structures benefits India's national security. It eliminates a safe haven for terrorists and gains India reliable access to Central Asia.[145] India's aid and soft

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137 Smruti S. Pattanaik, 'Iran Factor in India's Afghan Policy', 24 August 2012, Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses website, available at: <http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/IranfactorinIndiasAfghanPolicy_sspattanaik_240812>, accessed 7 May 2013.

138 Pattanaik, 'Iran Factor in India's Afghan Policy'.

139 Hanaeuer and Chalk, *India's and Pakistan's Strategies in Afghanistan*, p. 22.

140 Fair, 'Under the Shrinking US Security Umbrella', p. 187.

141 Alexander Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules: the new great power contest in Central Asia*, New York City, Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 169.

142 Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules*, p. 170.

143 Pattanaik, 'Iran Factor in India's Afghan Policy'.

144 'Khursid: India Wants Stable Afghanistan and Iran', Manoramaonline.com website, 29 June 2013, available at: <http://week.manoramaonline.com/cgi-bin/MMOnline.dll/portal/ep/theWeekContent.do?programId=1073754912&tabId=13&contentId=14412495&BV_ID=@@@>, accessed 1 July 2013.

145 Hanaeuer and Chalk, *India's and Pakistan's Strategies in Afghanistan,* p. ix.

power efforts in Afghanistan are therefore part of a long-term strategy[146] to generate goodwill 'which can be converted into political capital to boost its staying power in Afghanistan'.[147]

China – resource hungry benefactor

China and Afghanistan share a small border of approximately 76 kilometres in rugged and almost impenetrable mountainous terrain. China's views towards Afghanistan have primarily been from an internal security perspective, although in the last decade trade and investment imperatives have come to the fore. China has long regarded Afghanistan as a literal 'graveyard of empires' and it has been willing to assist in fulfilling that assessment.[148] In the 1980s, China provided arms and resources to the *mujahideen* as it did not want Soviet Russia to gain a firm presence close to China's borders nor threaten its regional friend Pakistan.[149]

Western intervention in Afghanistan has created seemingly contradictory policy responses from China. It was not enthusiastic about unilateral military operations[150] but it did assume that the West's presence would divert the attention of terrorist groups away from neighbouring countries including China.[151] Since 2001, Beijing has been very concerned with the presence of large numbers of US forces near its border[152] but it often emphasises that withdrawing forces must be cautiously done,

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146 Gurmeet Kanwal, 'US Strategy in Afghanistan and Regional Concerns', 21 February 2011, Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses website, available at: <http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/USStrategyinAfghanistanandRegionalConcerns_gkanwal_210211>, accessed 5 May 2013.

147 Pattanaik, 'Iran Factor in India's Afghan Policy'.

148 Raffaello Pantucci, 'China's Afghanistan Challenge', 5 April 2013, The Diplomat website, available at: <http://www.realclearworld.com/2013/04/07/chinas_afghanistan_challenge_146927.html>, accessed 15 May 2013.

149 Rakisits, 'Pakistan-China Bilateral Relations 2001-2011', p. 87.

150 The subtext of China's speech at the UN General Assembly meeting on 11 November 2001 was a cautionary one, emphasising the primacy of the UN and collaborative international security frameworks: Tang Jiaxuan, 'Statement by H.E. Mr Tang Jiaxuan at the 56th Session of the UN General Assembly', New York, 11 November 2001, available at: <http://www.un.org/webcast/ga/56/statements/011111chinaE.htm>, accessed 10 July 2013.

151 Pantucci, 'China's Afghanistan Challenge'.

152 Christian Le Mière, 'Kabul's New Patron? The Growing Afghan-Chinese Relationship', *Foreign Affairs* website, 13 April 2010, available at <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/66194/christian-le-miere/kabuls-new-patron>, accessed 28 May 2013.

'fully take[ing] into account the situation on the ground ... in an appropriate and responsible manner while ensuring the security and stability'.[153] With 2014 approaching, China must focus on its strategy.

China's interests are best served with a stable Afghanistan[154] because the latter's proximity has a strong influence on the security of China's Xinjiang province.[155] The border province is home to the Muslim Uighur people and many have pressed for independence. Resistance groups such as the Turkistan Islamic Party have trained and based themselves in the eastern Afghanistan/northern Pakistan region, in an effort to evade China's reach.[156] The Taliban have been the 'spiritual agitator and material supplier' to this and other likeminded groups.[157] Although frustrated with such developments, China has never sought to deploy military forces into Afghanistan, at least in part because of recognition that a unilateral deployment of military forces would cause alarm in nations such as India and Japan.[158]

China pursues an assertive and strategic trade policy with Afghanistan as part of a broader economic push into the Central Asian region.[159] In securing strategic resources, China has made several substantial infrastructure investments in Afghanistan, particularly in the minerals and resources sectors. This includes purchasing mining rights in the world's largest copper field at Aynak (US$3.5 billion).[160] Beijing has also undertaken or will shortly commence key infrastructure projects, such as constructing railways and power stations, to position the region for development. Chinese developmental aid is also being provided to Kabul. These steps represent another growing driver for Chinese involvement in Afghanistan—the protection of its trade interests.

In addition to the above, motivation for Chinese action is in part driven by rivalry with India. 'China has long considered India to be its competitor for Asian

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153 UN Security Council, 'Minutes of the 6735th Meeting of the United Nations Security Council', New York, UN, 20 March 2012, available at: <http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/PV.6735>, accessed 10 July 2013, p. 21.

154 Pantucci, 'China's Afghanistan Challenge'.

155 Zhao Huasheng, *China and Afghanistan: China's interests, stances, and perspectives*, Washington DC, Center for Strategic & International Studies, March 2012, p. 3.

156 Formerly the East Turkistan Islamic Movement.

157 Huasheng, *China and Afghanistan*, p. 3.

158 Le Mière, 'Kabul's New Patron? The Growing Afghan-Chinese Relationship'.

159 Pantucci, 'China's Afghanistan Challenge'.

160 Aynak is to the southeast of Kabul.

hegemony' and investments in Afghanistan are one way to counter Indian interests, as well as lend support to China's ally and India's rival, Pakistan [161] A greater presence in Afghanistan, including offers to train Afghan police, may also help combat the flow of narcotics from Afghanistan to China (through Tajikistan).

China's increasing presence in Afghanistan is low-key, and trade and aid are investment-led, however, there are broader geostrategic imperatives which are indicative of the priorities of a regional hegemon.

Iran – waiting and watching

Iran's policy towards Afghanistan has been characterised as 'wait-and-watch', with its actions driven by national security interests at two levels.[162] At the local/regional level, Iran is trying to mitigate any adverse impacts on the nation arising from insurgency on the other side of its border. Iran's geostrategic policies are driven by its ongoing animosity towards the US. At both levels, fundamentalist Shiite Iran does not want a hardline Sunni government controlling Afghanistan in the way the Taliban did in the 1990s.

Iran has 'close linguistic and cultural ties to Afghanistan'[163] and, since 2001, it has 'used soft power to strengthen its foothold in Afghanistan through investment, trade and cultural linkages'.[164] Key drivers are the adverse impacts on Iranian society from the Afghan narcotics trade, the large number of Afghan refugees that have flooded into Iran during periods of crisis, and disputes with Afghanistan over sharing water in the rivers that flow through both nations. Iran also feels obliged to protect the Shiite Hazara minority within (mostly central) Afghanistan. A desire to

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161 Larry Goodson and Thomas H. Johnson, 'Parallels with the Past – How the Soviets Lost in Afghanistan, How the Americans are Losing', *Orbis*, Fall 2011, p. 586.

162 Kanwal Gurmeet, 'Peace and Stability in Afghanistan: the role of neighbours', Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses website, available at: <http://idsa.in/idsacomments/PeaceandStabilityinAfghanistanTheRoleofNeighbours_gkanwal_131212#.UYd5byzCMi0.email>, accessed 8 May 2013.

163 Greg Bruno and Lionel Beehner, 'Iran and the Future of Afghanistan', Council on Foreign Relations website, available at: < http://www.cfr.org/iran/iran-future-afghanistan/p13578#>, accessed on 27 May 2013.

164 Omar Samad, 'Iran's Influence in Afghanistan After US Pullout', The Iran Primer website, 17 January 2013, available at: <http://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2013/jan/17/iran%E2%80%99s-influence-afghanistan-after-us-pullout?print>, accessed 15 May 2013.

increase trade between the two nations (on terms more favourable to Iran) is also an important goal.[165]

Iran has historically been deeply suspicious of the intentions of other powers in Afghanistan. The Taliban's control of Afghanistan in the 1990s posed an ideological and geopolitical challenge to Iran. This was because the Taliban enabled both Pakistan and Saudi Arabia access to Central Asia and Afghanistan, at Iran's expense.[166] The Taliban were denounced by Iran's supreme leader as an affront to Islam and, in 1998, a military conflict was almost triggered when the Taliban killed 11 Iranian diplomats and truck drivers.[167] Such was the tension between Iran and the Taliban regime that the former offered search-and-rescue assistance to Operation ENDURING FREEDOM in 2001, despite longstanding animosity between the two and the existence of crippling international sanctions on Iran.[168] It marked the beginnings of an essentially defensive foreign policy strategy by Iran towards Afghanistan in the era of Western intervention.[169]

Iran's attitudes changed dramatically after a series of events including President Bush's labelling of Iran as part of the 'Axis of Evil' in 2002,[170] the signing of a strategic partnership memorandum of understanding between Afghanistan and the US in 2005 and 2012 (enabling the US to remain in Afghanistan post-2014), and the election of the hard-line Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad. Since then, the tenor of Iranian-US relations has deteriorated. There are assertions that Iran is the most influential state in the Arab world, even though it is not technically an Arab nation.[171] With the US's withdrawal from Iraq, Iran is certainly the most influential nation in the Gulf region. For its part, Tehran claims it is an 'Axis of Resistance' to US and Israeli interests.[172]

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165 Samad, 'Iran's Influence in Afghanistan After US Pullout'.

166 Alireza Nader and Joya Laha, *Iran's Balancing Act in Afghanistan*, Santa Monica, Rand National Defence Research Institute, 2011, pp. 5-6.

167 Bruno and Beehner, 'Iran and the Future of Afghanistan'.

168 Katzman, *Afghanistan*, p. 51.

169 Weinbaum, *Afghanistan and Its Neighbors,* p. 13.

170 Bush, 'State of the Union Address to the 107th Congress', p. 106.

171 Thanassis Cambanis, 'How Do You Say "Quagmire" in Farsi? Why Syria Could Turn out to be Iran's Vietnam – not America's', 13 May 2013, Foreign Policy website, available at: <http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/05/13/how_do_you_say_quagmire_in_farsi_syria_iran_hezbollah>, accessed 15 May 2013.

172 Cambanis, 'How Do You Say "Quagmire" in Farsi?'.

These developments have been reflected in Iran's aggressive and more ideologically-based foreign policy towards Afghanistan and Western intervention.[173] Actions have included supplying funds and weapons to sympathetic Afghan insurgent groups.[174] It has also cooperated with India in the construction of a major road from the Iranian port of Chāh Bahār into Afghanistan, giving both it and India greater access and influence. As 2014 approaches, Iranian security and intelligence groups are also increasingly active in 'prodding a Western withdrawal and shaping Afghan politics'.[175] In regards to the latter, Tehran is seeking a regime that is, at best, pro-Iranian and, at worst, neutral but cooperative.

Russia and the Central Asian Republics (CARs) – benefiting through proximity

Central Asia has seen significant changes since the end of the Cold War, particularly during the last decade, with increased multi-polar competition for influence within the region. There are significant cultural linkages between various CARs and Afghanistan.[176] Since 2001, as will be shown below, Afghanistan has been used by the republics as a prop in advancing their domestic interests in regards to obtaining legitimacy, funds and influence.

Russia 'easily possesses the most extensive array of regional ties' in Central Asia.[177] During most of the 1990s, however, it 'remained relatively weak and focused on muddling through its domestic reforms and economic troubles'.[178] During the 1990s Afghan civil war, Russia was one of the main backers of the Northern Alliance; its support was driven at least in part by the Taliban's recognition of Chechen independence.[179]

For the CARs, the 1990s was a period of establishing separate identities and national coherence, outside of the former Soviet economic and political system. While independence had been gained peacefully, the 'enduring legacy' of Soviet rule had been the establishment of patrimonial rulers in each republic, all focused on

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173 Weinbaum, *Afghanistan and Its Neighbors,* p. 13.

174 Robert M. Gates, 'US Secretary of Defence Media Conference', 13 June 2007, available at: <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=3987>, accessed 27 May 2013.

175 Samad, 'Iran's Influence in Afghanistan After US Pullout'.

176 The nations of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

177 Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules*, p. 51

178 Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules*, pp. 19-20.

179 Weinbaum, *Afghanistan and Its Neighbors*, p. 15.

retaining power.[180] Initially dependent on (a generally disinterested) Russia, the republics actively sought Western and Chinese investment.[181] The results were mixed and, in the case of the US, aid and investment were often conditional on liberal economic and political reform.[182] With the exception of Turkmenistan, the CARs did not recognise the Taliban; regime leaders were concerned about the potential spread of Islamic insurgency, either as part of a spill-over from the Afghanistan civil war or the actions of dissatisfied former *mujahideen* fighters. This aside, the 1990s was a period of relative calm and seclusion that enabled CAR regimes to concentrate their powerbases.[183]

In 2001, Central Asia suddenly became vitally important to the US—bases inside and transit routes through the republics were critical for military operations in Afghanistan. This degree of interest, combined with the potential availability of vast amounts of hydrocarbons in the region, prompted international competition for influence and support. Motives for Chinese and US engagement include the 'pressing need to stabilize adjacent regions',[184] while India and Pakistan each seek influence to counter any real or perceived influence of the other.[185] Russia is reasserting its belief that it is the dominant regional player; its objectives include countering regional Islamic independence groups, securing control of hydrocarbons and obtaining regional allies to counter US hegemonic ambitions.[186] This intense competition has been used by the various CAR regimes 'strategically and expediently'[187] in entrenching and significantly enriching their undemocratic regimes.

In summary, Afghanistan's significance to Russia and the CARs arises not from any direct bilateral engagement *per se* but, rather, from the importance that Afghanistan represents to other third parties. The increasing political and social differences

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180 Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules*, p. 16.

181 Weinbaum, *Afghanistan and Its Neighbors,* p. 14.

182 Richard Rousseau, 'Competing Geopolitical Interests of China, Russia and the United States in Central Asia and the Caspian Region', *Khazar Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol. 14, No. 3, 2011, p. 24.

183 Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules*, p. 162

184 Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules*, p. 6.

185 See the sections on Pakistan and India, pp. 22-30.

186 Rousseau, 'Competing Geopolitical Interests', pp. 21-2.

187 Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules*, p. 9.

among the republics, in particular, 'rule out a single approach to engaging them as regional players'.[188]

The US – a drifting focus

As global hegemon and instigator of the intervention in Afghanistan in 2001, the US took on the role of 'principal guarantor of Afghanistan's transition'.[189] Apart from Afghanistan itself, since 2001, the US has expended the most in terms of lives, resources and political capital, in developing the country. Despite this, the goals and objectives of the US in Afghanistan during the last decade have been mixed and ill-defined, and suborned to priorities in places such as Iraq. As 2014 approaches, the US is striving to implement a sustainable framework for withdrawing its combat forces while determining the quantum and role of an ongoing presence in the region which will meet US evolving national interests.

US politics since 2001 has been dominated by the mix of a 'War on Terror' (including Afghanistan) and the Iraq War.[190] American intervention in Afghanistan was initially widely supported domestically and the international community was 'virtually unanimous' in supporting efforts to transform Afghanistan into a stable state.[191] Initial success seemingly reinforced what became known as the 'Bush Doctrine'; especially his 'Freedom Agenda'—an 'idealistic and realistic' approach to creating freedom and free societies.[192] It was also championed by the broader neo-conservative movement as proof that eradicating terrorism and the promotion of democracy throughout the world were 'inexorably intertwined'.[193] Problematically, initial success came without the US first formulating a broad strategy.[194] Within weeks, the US Administration lost its focus on Afghanistan for Iraq,[195] and the 'administration squandered an opportunity to manage a postconflict [sic]

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188 Weinbaum, *Afghanistan and Its Neighbors*, p. 14.

189 Maley, *Rescuing Afghanistan*, p. 101.

190 Lansford, *9/11 and the Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq*, p. 157.

191 Dov S. Zakheim, *A Vulcan's Tale: how the Bush Administration mismanaged the reconstruction of Afghanistan*, Harrisonburg, Brookings Institution Press, 2011, Loc. 2191 of 4245 (Kindle iPad edition).

192 Bush, *Decision Points*, p. 397.

193 Lansford, *9/11 and the Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq*, p. 162.

194 Hew Strachan, 'The Lost Meaning of Strategy', *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, Vol. 47, No. 3, 2005, p. 51.

195 As early as 15 September 2001, there was open debate between senior Bush Administration figures about whether there was sufficient cause to attack Iraq: see Bob Woodward, *Bush at War*, US, Simon & Schuster, 2002, pp. 74-92.

environment properly'.[196] Symptomatic of the situation was the fact that the Bush Administration only supported a prominent NATO presence in Afghanistan as long as operations did not interfere with the US's commitments in Iraq.[197] Many of the NATO nations that did deploy to Afghanistan articulated their goals to domestic populations in terms of peacekeeping or reconstruction—it was not framed within the Bush Doctrine or COIN paradigms.[198] This would later have adverse ramifications when the US and NATO argued about the proper role and mandate of ISAF.

At no stage did the Bush Administration produce a 'rigorous internal strategic review or … formal written strategy' for Afghanistan.[199] Instead, it vacillated between describing the theatre as a confined military operation to remove the Taliban and destroy al-Qaeda capabilities, to a much broader remit of nation building, installing democracy and emancipating women.[200] At the same time that President Bush indicated US policy was 'to seek and support the growth of democratic movements [globally] … with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world',[201] debates raged between the US, NATO and GIRoA over the details of implementing a multifaceted COIN effort aimed at 'smothering the diffuse insurgency by shoring up the efforts of ... [GIRoA] to provide security, governance, and economic development'.[202] These efforts were significantly complicated by the competing priorities of the various state and non-state actors, including the UN.

The second term of the Bush Administration (2005 – 2008) was marked by intense domestic partisanship over the ongoing and seemingly intractable wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The term 'War on Terror' was even (unsuccessfully) replaced in the Defense Department's parlance as 'The Long War',[203] a move symbolic of efforts to deal with increasing disillusionment among the US security community by redefining the Administration's understanding of what had initially been portrayed

196 Zakheim, *A Vulcan's Tale*.

197 Gareth Porter, 'How Afghanistan Became a NATO War', Aljazeera website, 4 January 2011.

198 Saghafi-Ameri, *Prospects for Peace and Stability in Afghanistan*, p. 3.

199 Catherine Dale, *War in Afghanistan: strategy, operations, and issues for Congress*, Washington DC, Congressional Research Service, 9 March 2011, p. 7.

200 Felbab-Brown, 'Slip-Sliding on a Yellow Brick Road'.

201 Bush, 'Second Inaugural Address', 'Selected Speeches of President George W. Bush: 2001 – 2008', The White House, President George W Bush, Archive website, p. 274.

202 Steve Bowman and Catherine Dale, *War in Afghanistan: strategy, military operations, and issues for Congress*, Washington DC, Congressional Research Service, 3 December 2009, p. 4.

203 US Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defence Review Report*, Washington DC, 6 February 2006, p. 1.

as short campaigns to install freedom and democracy. Events such as the poor federal emergency response to New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 further harmed President Bush's credentials.[204] In the last months of his Presidency, Bush argued that the objectives in Afghanistan had expanded to helping Pakistan defeat insurgent forces based in that country.[205] This was overdue recognition that the insurgency had spread beyond Afghanistan.

A central platform to Barak Obama's election campaign was concluding the Iraq war and deploying extra resources to Afghanistan. Once in office, President Obama launched a series of policy reviews for Afghanistan, as part of his efforts to reinvigorate the campaign in what he later called a 'War of Necessity'.[206] Debate within the Administration and military was lively and strongly contested, at times pitting the President against the military establishment.[207] At essence was a debate over pursuing a COIN or counter-terrorist model of operation, or a hybrid of the two, and whether the scope of US commitment would be expansive or narrowly defined. The differences in these concepts are significant, with COIN generally regarded as requiring significantly more resources and width of missions. Obama's eventual policy was a mix: he is recorded as saying that it was not a 'full-blown' COIN strategy but had COIN elements within it.[208] The new approach was limited in scope and time, and was conditions-based.

The objectives of President Obama's 2009 Afghan strategy are recorded earlier in the paper.[209] Unlike Bush, Obama rejected an open-ended escalation of nation building: 'I refuse to set goals that go beyond our responsibility, our means or our interests'.[210] Obama argued that his strategy was a responsible way to approach 'Transition', and

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204 When he left office, President Bush's popularity rate was in the low 20s.

205 George W. Bush, 'President Bush Visits National Defense University's Distinguished Lecture Program, Discusses Global War on Terror', The White House, President George W. Bush, Archive website, 9 September 2008, available at: <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2008/09/20080909.html>, accessed 19 June 2013.

206 Barak Obama, 'Remarks by the President at the Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention', Address by the President of the United States of America, 17 August 2009, available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-veterans-foreign-wars-convention>, accessed 20 June 2013.

207 Bob Woodward, *Obama's Wars*, UK, Simon & Schuster, 2010, p. 313.

208 Woodward, *Obama's Wars*, p. 325.

209 See page 14.

210 Obama, December 2009 'Address on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan'.

one that would in due course best free his Administration to focus on nation building within the US.[211]

Critics of Obama's strategy cite among other things that the initial rhetoric of defeating the Taliban subsequently became 'far more circumscribed than that of the Bush [A]dministration'.[212] Particular criticism emerged over the Administration's reframing of aspects of the conflict under the banner of 'AfPak' (an abbreviation for Afghanistan Pakistan); a neologism introduced in March 2009 for designating Afghanistan and Pakistan as a single theatre of operations.[213] The US had hoped to use an Afghan-Pakistan-India paradigm but this was rejected by India which probably feared 'that the issue of Kashmir would eventually be put on the table'.[214] AfPak was implemented even though it offended both parties, particularly Pakistan, and it was quietly dropped in late 2009.[215] The significant deterioration in relations between the US and Pakistan in 2011 and 2012 added to the criticism of the inability of the Obama Administration to fully pursue its initial AfPak objectives.[216]

The above notwithstanding, the Obama Administration has been stridently pursuing the implementation of 'transition' on or before the projected date of 2014. As George Friedman has recently articulated, the US's current strategic priority is to end the war;[217] it is leaving Afghanistan, and the debate is around how quickly, and which factions assume a leadership role within Afghanistan during the next decade. These implications will now be discussed.

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211 Obama, December 2009 'Address on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan'.

212 Felbab-Brown, 'Slip-Sliding on a Yellow Brick Road'.

213 Noor ul Haq and Nargis Zahra, *Contours of US 'AfPak' Strategy*, Islamabad, Islamabad Policy Research Institute, November 2009, p. 1.

214 Rakisits, 'Pakistan-US Bilateral Relations', p. 21.

215 Josh Rogin, 'Team Obama Scuttles the Term "AfPak"', 20 January 2010, *Foreign Policy* website, available at: <http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2010/01/20/team_obama_scuttles_the_term_afpak>, accessed 20 June 2013.

216 See page 14.

217 George Friedman, 'The Reality of Afghanistan', *Stratfor* website, available at: <www.stratfor.com>, accessed 26 June 2013.

Part Three – The Next Decade

In forecasting through the next decade, it is difficult to envisage a scenario where GIRoA can continue to function without substantial financial assistance from the international community. Afghanistan's 'strategic situation is an awkward one, and there are no prospects for immediate relief'.[218] More so than at any time since 2002, the degree of uncertainty about the future is creating a substantial sense of instability as regional actors hedge their policy options, exploiting the situation to best shape it in their own interests.[219] This section will examine this issue and illustrate that the degree of instability in the region will likely worsen during the next decade.

The key determinant of future scenarios is the Afghans themselves. Most Afghans want a political solution to the current conflict,[220] and the number of people with no sympathy for armed insurgents is on the increase (63 per cent).[221] While it appears that few want a return to the excesses of Taliban rule, the state's viability 'is critically challenged from within'.[222] Afghanistan continues to be divided on ethnic lines, with the insurgency somewhat of a continuation of longstanding enmity between Pashtuns and other groups. The presence of warlords, even those allied to GIRoA, is a challenge to central authority but is an essential fact of Afghan life as the central government lacks the capacity and credibility to exert influence throughout the nation. The Taliban are 'weaker than they were but stronger and more coherent than anyone else in the country'[223] and it is quite possible that, with a degree of luck, skill and guile, they will be able again to dominate Afghan society. This will depend on resilience of the ANSF, the quantum and sustainability of financial aid from the international community to pay for GIRoA's security apparatus, and—perhaps most critically of all—the ability of GIRoA to retain public support. Statistics provided earlier in this paper indicate there has been some progress in this regard, however, there are questions as to whether this support is genuine and lasting, and whether it is limited to urban population bases and non-Pashtu groups.

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218 Maley, *Rescuing Afghanistan*, p. 115.

219 Fair 'Under the Shrinking US Security Umbrella', p. 186.

220 Tariq, Haqbeen and Kakar, *Afghanistan in 2012*, p. 14.

221 Tariq, Haqbeen and Kakar, *Afghanistan in 2012*, p. 57.

222 Barbara J. Stapleton, 'Beating a Retreat: prospects for the transition process in Afghanistan, Executive Summary', 2012, Afghanistan Analysts Network website, available at: <http://aan-afghanistan.com/uploads/20120516_ExecSum_Beating_a_Retreat.pdf>, accessed 15 May 2013.

223 Friedman, 'The Reality of Afghanistan'.

The US will remain a critical actor even though it is clear it wants to exit Afghanistan as quickly as practicable.[224] Any US military presence post-2014 will be modest and likely to focus on counter-terrorist operations against al-Qaeda. The fact that the US has been conducting secret negotiations with the Taliban (much to the chagrin of Afghan President Karzai)[225] is indicative of the strong desire by America to reach a political settlement that will enable withdrawal of its forces—gracefully or otherwise.[226]

The Russian experience of the early 1990s indicates that GIRoA should be able to maintain a degree of effectiveness, so long as it receives international funding. As with that experience though, GIRoA may prove incapable of operating outside of the larger urban centres. The challenge will be ongoing commitment by donor nations in funding GIRoA, particularly if the world financial situation fails to recover from its current malaise. GIRoA's position as a viable but not ideal option may not be of lasting attraction to the West, particularly if the Taliban prove adroit at managing their interests in a post-2014 policy environment.

In any situation where the US and the West have a reduced or non-existent interest in Afghanistan, the nation will fall further victim to the machinations of its neighbours, for history suggests that it is 'unlikely ever itself to be strong enough to deter meddling by neighbours'.[227]

Many commentators have speculated on ways in which stability can be achieved in Afghanistan. While possible scenarios are numerous, most are variations on a basic theme: stability through regional partnerships and cooperation. This requires Afghanistan and Pakistan to reach mutual understanding and agreement on the legitimacy of the Durand Line, and a renunciation by Pakistan of support for the Taliban and anti-GIRoA terrorist groups. It is argued that such an agreement would in time enable GIRoA to defeat the insurgents and the US to defeat al-Qaeda, after which the US would withdraw the last of its military forces. The resultant peace and stability would enable secure trade routes to be opened from Pakistan, India and Iran to Central Asia, with China also able to exploit its Afghan trade interests.

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224 Friedman, 'The Reality of Afghanistan'.

225 Khan, 'What's really bothering Hamid Karzai?'

226 Friedman, 'The Reality of Afghanistan'.

227 Maley, *Rescuing Afghanistan*, p. 115.

Increased wealth and security would be created in Afghanistan, encouraging the return of refugees from places such as Iran and Pakistan, and further international development and investment. Afghanistan could then focus on enhancing the quality of life of its people, albeit using political systems that are not fully democratic or progressive.

This type of scenario is unattainable in the present climate because it requires the various actors to initiate fundamental changes to longstanding policies, practices and positions. No Afghan government (particularly if it relies on Pashtu support) is likely to accept the Durand Line as a legitimate border. Similarly, Pakistan will continue to view Afghanistan from a perspective of its ongoing existential struggle against India and its consequent search for strategic depth. As a testament to this observation, the Pakistani military has become even more obsessed with India in recent times.[228] Although the May 2013 election of Nawaz Sharif as Prime Minister was a historical milestone for Pakistani democracy, his platform includes talking to the Taliban and opposing US drone strikes. These policies have the potential to further strain relations with the US and, perhaps more importantly for Sharif, negotiating with the Pakistan Taliban may alienate his own military.[229]

For its part in the India-Pakistan imbroglio, India will continue to pursue a public policy of restraint towards any intervention in Afghanistan[230] but it will not allow Pakistan a free hand with Afghan affairs. India has invested too much in establishing a substantial but low-key presence in Afghanistan. The degree of rivalry between India and Pakistan in a weakened Afghanistan has only intensified since 2001.[231] India is also mindful of China's growing presence in Afghanistan, and is particularly aware of the implications this has for the India/China relationship.

While Beijing is concerned about regional instability post-2014,[232] it is not clear whether it has properly considered its intentions even though China has significant

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228 Rashid, *Pakistan on the Brink*, pp. 21 – 22.

229 Rakisits, 'Can Nawaz Sharif Make Peace with the Taliban?'

230 'Khursid: India Wants Stable Afghanistan and Iran', Manoramaonline.com website, 29 June 2013, available at: <http://week.manoramaonline.com/cgi-bin/MMOnline.dll/portal/ep/theWeekContent.do?programId=1073754912&tabId=13&contentId=14412495&BV_ID=@@@>, accessed 1 July 2013.

231 George J. Gilboy and Eric Heginbotham, *Chinese and Indian Strategic Behaviour*, US, Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 276.

232 Rakisits, 'Pakistan-China Bilateral Relations 2001-2011', p. 99.

economic leverage in the region.[233] China's use of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), a 'seemingly dynamic regional organisation that rejects Western hegemony and values',[234] could be extended to incorporate Afghanistan which has observer status at the SCO. However, this body is not without internal tensions between China and Russia over their influence with the various CARs. Russia's resurgence in Central Asia through developing and supporting regional institutions are part of its efforts to reassert regional primacy.[235] Maintaining an indirect spoiling role in Afghanistan could be a viable way to gain a bargaining position to counter US interests in Central Asia, as well as protect its own interests by preventing the further spread of terrorism or inter-ethnic violence.

Iran similarly has vested interests in maintaining a degree of instability in Afghanistan, even though 'Iran's national interests in Afghanistan often coincide with US objectives ... [such as] establishing a viable Afghan government'.[236] Iran's deep concerns with the Taliban will continue to be overshadowed by ongoing rivalries and tensions with the US and other Western powers over broader issues such as conflict in Syria, and Iran's development of a nuclear capability. In supporting the Syrian Government in that nation's civil war, Iran has sacrificed most of its Arab allies.[237] If that is the case, it is difficult to envisage that on an issue closer to home and adjacent to its borders, Tehran would willingly compromise its anti-US approach. A possible exception would be if a deal is made between the two nations utilising terms that are clearly beneficial to Iran. This is unlikely because of the entrenched policy positions both in Washington and Tehran.

While there is little sign that a comprehensive region-wide approach to stabilising Afghanistan can be implemented in the coming decade, there is also little prospect of conventional inter-state conflict. A conventional war is counter-productive if for no other reason than the possibility that it would escalate to a nuclear confrontation between Pakistan, India and possibly China. Instead, the most likely outcome will be that while the US and the West focus their attentions elsewhere, regional actors will continue pursuing their own agendas in Afghanistan, playing a contemporary version of the 'Great Game' by contributing to and exploiting instability in Afghanistan through the use of proxies and political intrigue. One hope, as outlined

233 Pantucci, 'China's Afghanistan Challenge'.
234 Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules*, p. 5.
235 Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules*, pp. 71-2.
236 Nader and Laha, *Iran's Balancing Act in Afghanistan*, p. 1.
237 Cambanis, 'How Do You Say "Quagmire" in Farsi?'.

by William Maley, is for Afghanistan to use its inherent vulnerability in promoting regional solutions by acting as an honest broker not because it is in a position of strength but because it is in a position of weakness. This would require 'considerable diplomatic dexterity',[238] which Kabul will almost certainly lack into the foreseeable future. It is, nevertheless, one option Afghans could pursue.

Conclusion

The year 2014 could prove to be a watershed moment in Afghan history—the Afghans will elect a new President and, under the auspices of 'Transition', the West will withdraw most if not all its military forces. Uncertainty surrounds both events. There is still no clear idea of who will contest the election, and debate continues as to whether the systems are ready to conduct an election for a new President. Negotiations continue between GIRoA and various Western nations as to the nature and quantum of their military and civilian commitments post-2014. These two seminal events, outcomes of Western intervention, will be the culmination of a 13 year-saga that has seen Afghanistan witness chaos, warfare, instability and uncertainty, along with undeniable (although limited and controversial) degrees of economic and social progress for some elements of Afghan society.

The central thesis of this paper is that Western intervention in Afghanistan has failed to deliver stability. If anything, the degree of instability today is higher than in 2001, and will likely increase in the coming years with the West's diminishing interest in and commitment to Afghanistan. As a consequence, the aspirations and hopes that the West have for Afghanistan (and that the majority of Afghans have themselves) are being suborned to the ambitions of other regional powers. Afghanistan's curse is borne from its geography—its proximity to other (greater) powers who are competing for regional dominance. In this contemporary version of the 19th century's 'Great Game', the interests of the Afghan people continue to be inconsequential to the *realpolitik* ambitions of regional powers. Therefore, despite all the so-called 'blood and treasure' that has been expended since 2001 (and before that since 1979), Afghanistan will continue to be a cauldron of geostrategic intrigue well into the 21st century.

238 Maley, *Rescuing Afghanistan*, p. 117.

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