

For good or bad Afghanistan's geographic position has contributed the single most important element to the shaping of its history, its ethnic diversity, its economy and its political situation in the region and increasingly in the world.

Magnus and Naby, *Afghanistan*, 1998

## Introduction

Throughout its history, Afghanistan has been subject to intervention by external powers. Forces operating from outside its geographical confines have continually determined its overall politics, social structure and consequently its place in the world. Being at the crossroads of Central Asia, it was subjected to an uninterrupted stream of offensives and conquests from the earliest times.

The first recorded foreign invasion of the country took place in sixth century BC, when Darius I of Persia brought it under his control. This was followed by another spectacular invasion by Alexander the Great in 328 BC. Alexander's conquest formally opened up the society to Indo-European commerce, culture and religious ideas. In the following centuries, Sakas (Scythians), Parthians and Kushans (who were practising Buddhists), all tracing their roots to Central Asia, kept the country successively under their control. Interestingly,

this pattern continued well into the seventh century AD. During this phase, Hephthalites, or White Huns, ruled over Afghanistan in the fifth and sixth centuries AD.

Conquest of another form took place in Afghanistan in the seventh century AD, when invading Arabs introduced Islam into the country. From a peripheral territory lying in the outlying areas of various emperors and their empires, Afghanistan briefly became the seat of an empire when Mahmud of Ghazni made it the centre of Islamic power, glory and civilization in the eleventh century. Invading Mongols from the north, however, destroyed much of Mahmud's creation, and from the thirteenth until the sixteenth century Afghanistan's fortunes were created, destroyed and recreated by Timur-i-Lang (Tamerlane), Babur (the founder of the Mughal dynasty in India) and the Safavid rulers of Persia.

Afghanistan entered the modern age with the introduction of European colonialism in Asia. Unlike many of its Asian counterparts, Afghanistan escaped full-scale colonization. However, its internal politics and the right to conduct its affairs with the outside world with absolute freedom were severely curtailed. Its accursed geography once again came to determine the fate of the Afghan people and their larger political processes. The 'strategic location of Afghanistan made it important for the control of the Indian subcontinent, defensively as well as offensively' (L. Dupree 1997: 343).

### **'The Great Game'**

European imperialism entered a new phase when Germany was united under Bismarck, and the new unified nation tried to acquire colonies to gain respectability as a power to be reckoned with. This altered Russian and British geopolitical thinking in Central Asia and Afghanistan. Lord Curzon (viceroy of India, 1899–1905), a great believer in 'British Forward Policy', saw imperialist fervour in Europe as a great opportunity to acquire new territories by way of rescinding all earlier treaties with Afghanistan.

According to Curzon, Turkistan, Afghanistan, Transcaspia, Persia, etc. are pieces on a chess-board upon which is being played out a game for dominance of the world. Of all these places, Afghanistan was closest to the British India geographically, and appeared within its reach. British India had already fought two wars with Afghans in order to fulfil this ambition. Under Curzon's leadership there was a revival in British expansionism. Soon the British were pushing their outposts into tribal territories well within Afghanistan. But there was one obstacle.

From the seventeenth century, Tsarist regimes in Russia coveted the warm water ports to the south of their land borders. Peter the Great (1682–1725) was the first to introduce this idea among his fellow citizens. Russia coveted warm water ports to the south, either on the Dardanelles, in the Persian Gulf or in the Indian Ocean (L. Dupree 1997: 363). Many Russians considered it a national duty and their historic mission to find ways to move forward in this direction. Obstacles to the fulfilment of this national goal, however, were many. This ambition was curtailed by the presence of Persia (modern-day Iran) and Afghanistan, which stood as a barricade to Russia's southward expansion. Persia, owing to its powerful empire and solid military base, was almost impregnable by the Russians. Afghanistan, however, was a different matter.

The decline of the Safavids in Persia and of the Turkish Ottoman Empire, coupled with marginalization of Central Asian khanates in the nineteenth century, produced a power vacuum in and around Afghanistan. This new uncertain political atmosphere created conditions for other powers to step into the vacuum. Tsarist Russia found it to be an opportune moment to bring Afghanistan into its sphere of influence, and nurtured the hope of merging it subsequently with the Russian Empire. But this expansionist design was a direct threat to the interests of British India. In addition, Russian or British gain or loss in Asia had direct implications for those nations' strength and standing in Europe (Yapp 1980; Klass 1990; Hauner 1990). Afghanistan, in other words, held the key to the future success or failure of two powerful empires

in Asia and Europe. Whilst both were aware of Afghanistan's strategic geography, neither was prepared to engage in a direct military confrontation leading to a conclusive result.

Instead, both tried to test their prowess indirectly. And Afghanistan became a cockpit for their battle skills. Their diplomatic and military offensives were enacted in this no man's land. This cat and mouse game between imperial Russia and British India was termed as 'the Great Game' by the English poet and novelist Rudyard Kipling. During the Great Game, both Russia and British India would invade a part of Afghan territory and retreat afterwards. In this imperial game of chess, various regions of northern Afghanistan fell to Russian incursion at one point or another, and the British controlled parts of southern Afghanistan on several occasions throughout nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

British occupation of southern Afghanistan – namely, the vital Khyber Pass – prompted Tsarist Russia to respond in a similar manner. It interpreted the British invasion of the country as a direct threat to its interests. Under Great Game politics, the Russians suspected the British of hatching a diabolical scheme to create an anti-Russian confederacy consisting of the khanates of Bukhara, Khiva and Kokand (Hopkirk 1994; Meyer and Brysac 2000). The British, in turn, suspected the Russians of similar designs by trying to incorporate these states into their forward defence of Turkestan through Afghanistan and then India (Hauner 1990: 80). In quick succession, imperial Russia gobbled up one territory after another in Central Asia, either through the imposition of a system of political and economic vassalage or through control of trade, until it reached the doors of Afghanistan. The British under the 'Forward Strategy' would extend their military stronghold close to the Persian border by establishing the impregnable outpost in Herat.

Although Afghanistan's impassable vastness, and this quirky colonial engagement, enabled it to avoid complete occupation by either Tsarist Russia or imperial India, the Great Game nevertheless severely restricted the country's political process, plunging its future into darkness and

turning Afghanistan into a nation ever suspicious of outsiders. The British for their part perpetually accused various Afghan ruling houses as Tsarist sympathizers, and held them responsible for not doing enough to stop Russian incursion into Afghanistan. Armed often with very little or no substantive evidence to support their accusations, the British instigated various military campaigns against the country. These were known as the Anglo-Afghan wars: the first in 1839–42, the second in 1878–80, and the third in 1919. These campaigns were doomed from the start. According to a contemporary study, the first invasion of Afghanistan was ‘the most complete humiliation in the history of the British Empire – a cocktail of viceregal arrogance, diplomatic stupidity, and military ineptitude leading to the annihilation of the invading army on its way back’ (Meyer and Brysac 2000: 72).

Having failed to conquer or even subdue the Afghans in the first two Anglo-Afghan wars, the British were forced to subsidize an Afghan ruler (powerful enough to be accepted by his own people and recognized outside) to serve as a buffer between an ambitious Tsarist Russia and British India. For this, ‘the British sought a ruler who could establish a government stable enough to make Afghanistan a barrier to the Russians while not posing a threat to India’ (Magnus and Naby 1998: 35). Ultimately, the choice fell on Abdur Rahman Khan, a nephew of Amir Sher Ali, who lived in exile in Tashkent. The British, who ‘respect even those monarchs who betray them’ (Kapuściński 1985: 190), invited the renegade Abdur Rahman to take power in Afghanistan, simply because no one else could do it (Klass 1990: 2).

For his part, Abdur Rahman had a very sound appreciation of the politics of the Great Game. His first-hand experience of Russian politics during his exile in Tashkent and direct dealings with the British made him realize that these powers harboured strategic visions completely opposed to each other. He concluded that while the Russian posture was offensive, conditioned by its resolve to find access to warm water ports in the Indian Ocean, the British interest in Afghanistan was purely defensive and motivated by the

resolve to stop the Russian advancement at all costs. Confronted by these antagonistic camps on both sides Abdur Rahman Khan would muse: 'How can a small power like Afghanistan which is like a goat between these lions (Britain and Tsarist Russia), or grain of wheat between two strong millstones of the grinding mill, stand in the midway of the stones without being ground to dust?' (Khan 1900: 280).

Yet, by playing off these powers against each other, he secured Afghanistan's continued independence. In order to avoid a direct confrontation between them, Russia and Britain came to respect Afghanistan's borders. While Afghanistan was useful to the great empires for sustaining the balance of power, the rulers in Afghanistan received enough resources from the neighbouring powers to sustain control and internal stability (Stobdan 1999: 723).

Strange as it may seem, the Great Game was ultimately responsible for the emergence of the modern Afghan state. The Anglo-Russian competition in Central Asia led to the demarcation of Afghanistan's ethnically divisive borders, and facilitated a process that culminated in the creation of a state structure in the modern sense of the term (Goodson 2001: 31). Prior to Russian and British inching towards Afghanistan, the latter had a chaotic political culture. There was no centralized Afghan state, no overarching authority, and only a very loose definition of Afghan identity among its inhabitants. Like most of India and much of Central Asia, Afghanistan was a hotbed of political intrigues, where competition between small local tribes, khanates and various ethnic groups was as natural as night following day. Thanks to both formal and informal agreements between the two imperial powers, Britain and Russia, Abdur Rahman Khan had to spend his energy and vision on consolidating his country.

Having been forced to exist in the shadow of two powerful empires with expansionist tendencies (Goodson 2001: 23), that throughout the twentieth century came to dominate the country's internal as well as external politics, Afghans developed an idiosyncratic attitude. These encounters with Russia and Britain made Afghans hardened isolationists and

fiercely independent. Strange as it may seem, 'at a time when virtually the entire Islamic world had come under the rule or indirect control of one or another European imperial power', Afghanistan retained its sovereignty (Magnus and Naby 1998: 38). In the grand scheme of the imperial chess-board, Afghanistan served as a no-go area. Its status as a buffer state was further consolidated during the leadership of Abdur Rahman Khan.

United as a result of foreign incursions, Afghanistan attained international recognition in 1919, following the conclusion of the third and last war with British India, and gained complete independence the same year. Soon after gaining international recognition, in 1926, the new king Amanullah launched Afghanistan on various diplomatic initiatives in the region, especially in Central Asia. As a part of this undertaking, an Afghan military contingent was sent to save the Bukharan Khanate from the Soviet Red Army. Kabul also mooted the idea of an Islamic Confederation in the region, comprising the khanates of Merv, Kushk, Panjdeh and Bukhara. Such a flurry of activities, however, yielded nothing. As the Soviet Union consolidated its authority over the whole of the Central Asian region, Afghanistan was pushed out of the regional decision-making process. What followed was complete isolation for Afghanistan.

During World War II, Afghanistan briefly became 'the Switzerland' of Central Asia in a new game of intrigue, as Allied and Axis coalitions jockeyed for position in the region (Bearden 2002: 39). For the Nazis, Afghanistan was important for two reasons. The first one was racial, and the second, geopolitical. The ideologues and politicians of the Third Reich believed Afghanistan to be the cradle of the Aryan heartland, and this belief led to increased co-operation with Afghanistan. The Nazi leader Adolf Hitler had greater ambitions. Like previous European conquerors, notably Alexander the Great, Hitler wanted to advance after defeating Russia in the direction of India through Afghanistan (Hauner 1990: 177–8). The attention paid to Afghanistan was short-lived, however. After the war, the country settled back into its natural state of isolation.

From the end of World War II until 1979, when the Soviets invaded it, the West and the international community blissfully ignored Afghanistan. Various factors contributed to this lack of interest. First, Afghanistan was not a major player in local and regional, let alone international, politics. Second, its contribution to world trade and commerce was almost negligible. Third, its inhospitable terrain and closed culture deterred potential tourists from visiting the country, which meant that it gained little or no publicity abroad. Fourth, its land-locked position, flanked by a secretive Soviet Union in the north and the mighty Himalayan range to the south, effectively sealed off its territory, creating a proverbial no man's land. Scholars, too, ignored Afghanistan, and it was regarded as 'a historic appendage that had outlived any significance' (Klass 1990: 6). Unlike the rest of the world community, the newly created Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) found it hard not to engage in Afghanistan. Although it rid itself of the Tsarist regime, it did not relinquish the Tsarist dream of bringing Afghanistan into the Russian orbit of influence, thereby to further its long-term interest in Asia.

### **The long betrayal**

Abolition of the Tsarist regime and the emergence of the Soviet Union in 1917 revived a renewed Russian interest in Afghanistan. Enthused by their success in Russia, the Bolsheviks switched to the pursuit of anti-colonial subversions and uprisings in Asia. Thanks to its strategic location, Afghanistan once again was a natural choice as a transit route to export this ideology to rest of Asia – that is, British India (Hopkirk 1994; Meyer and Brysac 2000). One of the foremost Russian military strategists, Andrei Evgenievich Snesev (1865–1937), who was favoured by both the Tsarist regime and its successor, the Communists, was of the opinion that the only way the Bolsheviks could extend their world domination and destroy the evils of capitalism was by a forward march to British India (Hauner 1990: 78). This

venture, of course, was dependent on finding a passage through Afghanistan.

Though ambitious, the Bolsheviks lacked the resources and a viable operational strategy to implement this policy framework. Therefore they remained indecisive on their forward policy for Asia and the place of Afghanistan in it in the initial years of their consolidation. Just as the Bolsheviks were unsure about their long-term treatment of Afghanistan, so 'the British vacillated between two extreme policies, and ended up adopting neither' (L. Dupree 1997: 405). Of these two, the first aimed at including those areas gained as a result of military expeditions into British India. The second was an extreme one, which included within it the proposal to retreat from Afghanistan completely and leave the country 'strictly to itself'.

In the post-World War I period the British position in India weakened considerably. Forced to worry about the rising level of dissent against its rule in India, the British Raj could not remain actively engaged in Afghan affairs. As mentioned earlier, following the end of the third Anglo-Afghan war in 1919, the British retreated from Afghanistan completely. Taking advantage of this new development, the Soviet state made gradual political incursions into Afghanistan through a series of treaties that would eventually force Afghans to stay within the Soviet sphere of influence. In 1921, King Amanullah signed a Soviet-Afghan treaty of friendship, which facilitated the presence of Soviet military and civilian advisors in Afghanistan. Within five years, Moscow managed to extract from the Afghans a non-aggression pact. The 1926 treaty also established Afghanistan's neutrality. Between the two World Wars, through various treaties, pacts, diplomatic arm-twisting, low-level military incursion and participation in internal power struggles while choosing one side over the other, the Soviets came to monopolize the political process in Afghanistan and its place in the world to their own advantage.

In spite of being a founding member of the United Nations and the Non-Alignment Movement (NAM) Afghanistan found it hard to repel the pervasive shadow of the USSR.

Once again, geography played a decisive role in preventing the country from assuming a completely independent stance. Following disputes over border demarcation, Pakistan sealed its frontiers for transit trade in the 1950s, and thereby forced Afghans to explore other alternatives. Land-locked, shunned by its southern neighbour, Pakistan, and under the heavy influence of its powerful northern neighbour, the USSR, Afghanistan had no choice but to turn to the Soviets just to stay afloat.

Taking advantage of this cartographic misery, the Soviets offered far too many economic concessions for Afghans to refuse. In the year 1955 alone, a series of treaties were signed between the two that facilitated Afghan–Russian barter trade. And in the same year, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev visited Afghanistan and provided it with a US \$100 million development loan. Among the other, less publicized issues covered during this visit was secret Soviet military aid, promises to repel the threat from Pakistan, and extension of the 1931 friendship treaty between the two countries for another ten years.

The hardened Afghans, however, tried to offset this overt reliance on the Soviet Union. They realized fully that, without the powerful British presence to balance Soviet pressures to the north, their freedom would be undermined and that they would be easily crushed by Moscow. Drawing from their experience of Great Game diplomacy, they attempted to negotiate another set of deals with the United States to counterbalance their dependence on Soviet Union. With this aim in view, in 1954 the government of Prime Minister Mohammed Daoud approached the Eisenhower administration in Washington for limited military aid to update its vintage and often obsolete military hardware.

The US strategists, for their part, viewed Afghanistan as of negligible importance to long-term American interests, and did not feel compelled to respond to its requests. The possibility of any meaningful military interaction dissipated when Washington insisted that Kabul join one of the US-sponsored military treaty organizations in the region, such as the Baghdad Pact or the South-East Asia Treaty Organization

(SEATO), immediately settle its border dispute with the key US ally in the region, Pakistan, and reorient its external policy in order to qualify for any arms shipments. A traditionally neutral and non-aligned Afghanistan could not reconcile itself to these conditions, and was forced to stay within the Soviet orbit.

The inability of American strategic thinkers to foresee Afghanistan as a place of future geopolitical importance was reflected in Washington's attitude to the country as 'strategically negligible, a relic of out-dated imperialist strategies, and the Afghans as annoyingly intractable, their independent stance verging on the uppity' (Klass 1990: 4). Post-World War II American strategic thinkers were of the opinion that those mountain ranges and the passes that had guarded the Indian subcontinent for 3,000 years had been rendered obsolete by the air age. According to this argument, Afghanistan's geography was of limited strategic importance, as it could be mitigated by superior air power. Since the USA was already treaty-bound with Pakistan on military co-operation, it did not feel the need to nurture Afghanistan.

Such a mind-set was further reinforced by Kabul's professed non-aligned beliefs during the early years of US–Soviet rivalry, which implied that it posed little or no threat to super-power interests. The Afghan government, however, saw a clear need to build up its military strength in order to avoid any external incursion into its territory and any undermining of its national interests. Since it shared a history of border disputes with its southern neighbour, Pakistan, various regimes in Afghanistan felt the need for a powerful ally. And the Soviet Union was a natural choice.

Every power has its own dynamics, its own domineering, expansionist tendencies, its bullying obsessive need to trample the weak (Kapuściński 1985: 176). With Afghanistan consolidating itself against its southern neighbour, there was a revival in the Soviet Union of the Tsarist vision of Russian expansionism in Asia. The Eurasian Heartland Thesis propounded by two twentieth-century geopolitical theorists, Sir Halford Mackinder and Karl Haushofer, of Britain and Germany respectively, immensely influenced Soviet geo-

strategists in this matter. According to these theorists, whoever controlled the Eurasian heartland, comprising south-eastern Europe, Central Asia and Afghanistan, with access to the Indian Ocean, held the key to world domination.

With the British out of India in 1947, and an increasingly internally unstable Afghanistan, the Soviets saw their chance for world domination. Thus began a series of Soviet overtures towards the country. As stated earlier, through various diplomatic, economic, military and political pacts, the Soviet Union maintained a permanent presence in Afghanistan. 'Capitalising on factional strife inside this land-locked country, Moscow invested its troops there, while simultaneously putting itself in a better position to move toward "warm waters" through the systematic build-up of transportation infrastructure' (Hauner 1990: 113–14). Moscow's policy planning and various programmes aimed at Afghanistan were designed to improve the long-term strategic value of the country if and when Soviet occupation should take place (Poullada 1990: 46). With the United States fighting a losing war in Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s, Afghanistan stayed within the close embrace of the Soviet Union, whose pre-eminence in the region remained unchallenged.

Although geopolitical considerations continued to dominate Soviet foreign policy postures, these underwent further transformations in the 1960s. Under Nikita Khrushchev the foreign policy projection was a composite of three key factors: strategic interests, ideology and opportunity. This policy framework remained unchanged until Leonid Brezhnev succeeded Khrushchev in 1964.

## **The Soviet Union**

While strategically important, Afghanistan was also a liability for the Soviet Union. The geographical proximity of the two countries and Moscow's close association with Kabul meant that it could not remain oblivious to the internal and external developments in and around Afghanistan. The prevalent thinking in Moscow in the first quarter of the

twentieth century was that ‘if the Afghans cannot keep their house in order, the Russians will be liable to do it for them’ (Byron 1981: 246).

In fact, this attitude was not only confined to a certain phase but characterized Soviet perception throughout. Sensing the rise of an incipient Communist movement in Afghanistan in the 1960s, the Soviet Union encouraged its growth, and by the mid-1970s the leftist factions within the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) had gained a foothold in the country’s political process. For Afghanistan’s then Prime Minister Mohammed Daoud, these were worrying developments. In order to isolate the Communists, he adopted a series of policy initiatives to shrug off Moscow’s domineering presence in Kabul. With this aim in mind, Daoud appeared in various international forums, and openly declared his intention to return Afghanistan ‘from its pro-Soviet orientation to genuine non-alignment’.

Daoud’s initiatives came to an early end when he was killed in a bloody Communist *coup* on 27 April 1978. As the Afghans came to realize that they had been taken over by the Communists, they revolted *en masse*. In order to placate this dissent, the Saur Revolution (as this *coup* came to be known) instantly started new land redistribution policies. The new regime immediately began signing hundreds of new agreements with Moscow and Soviet satellite states, bringing the country completely within the orbit of the world Communist movement. In addition, it gave up control over economic and military affairs.

As mentioned earlier, the Soviet contribution to the *coup* in Afghanistan and the subsequent Soviet invasion of the country in order to maintain the Communists in power, although they had an ideological underpinning, were also coloured by strategic interests and designed to benefit from the opportunity this confusion offered. Prior to the Saur Revolution, there was a growth of Islamic militancy in the country. Moscow was genuinely afraid that this might spread to Soviet Central Asia and create instability on its eastern flanks. A Communist takeover was ideal from Moscow’s point of view to isolate this impending threat. Soviet fear

gained further credence in 1979 when an Islamic revolution took place in Iran, a country on the borders of both the Soviet Union and Afghanistan.

A parallel was drawn to an earlier Communist domino effect theory, which was replaced by an Islamic domino effect, and Moscow tried its utmost to avoid such an occurrence. The Soviets did not want to see a repetition of the Iranian story in Afghanistan, and were not prepared to give in to any form of Islamic radicalism. Military intervention in Afghanistan was considered a vital security measure for Moscow, and it became one of the more urgent arguments for sending troops into the country. Intervention, in other words, held the possibility of keeping Afghanistan a buffer state between fanatic Iran, Islamic Pakistan and Moscow's own restive Central Asian Islamic flank (Garthoff 1994: 1036).

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan can be seen simultaneously as a culmination point, a watershed, and the beginning of a new phase in Moscow's foreign policy perspective. Invasion of Afghanistan was Moscow's first direct use of force in support of its objectives outside the Soviet bloc since World War II (Krakowski 1990: 165). Moscow, however, could not retreat from Afghanistan after a quick surgical intervention. Using Afghanistan's geopolitical situation, the United States began a series of offensives against its rival and arch-enemy Soviet Union.

Unable to retreat in the face of this proxy war, Moscow was dragged deeper and deeper into the Afghan quagmire. And it would be another ten years before it could finally withdraw from the country after a humiliating defeat. As the chief architect of US proxy intervention in Afghanistan, Zbigniew Brzezinski put it, Moscow's Afghan adventure 'brought about the demoralisation and finally the break-up of the Soviet Empire' (Brzezinski 1997).

## **The United States**

The US involvement in Afghanistan had a complex character. Self-serving diplomats, generals and politicians with

short-term goals and very little understanding of the dynamics of the conflict initiated it. The main architect of US policy toward Afghanistan was Zbigniew Brzezinski, the National Security Advisor to President Jimmy Carter. Brzezinski, a life-long anti-Communist of Polish origin, was driven by both an ideological and a personal mission. Following the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, he saw his chance to rival Henry Kissinger as a heavyweight strategic thinker and diplomat. In Brzezinski's scheme of things, it was not enough to create a front to expel the Soviet forces from Afghanistan; the conflict presented an opportunity to export the ideology of nationalism and radicalism to Central Asia which would greatly undermine the Soviet state and the political order. Prior to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Brzezinski was involved in starting a civil war in Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup> Following the invasion, 'Brzezinski was posing for photographs in a Pathan turban on the Khyber Pass and shouting "Allah is on your side", while Afghan fundamentalists were being feted as freedom-fighters in the White House and Downing Street' (Ali 2000: 134).

Once involved in the Afghan imbroglio, top US diplomats, generals and technocrats came to defend their stance on strategic grounds. In their view, Soviet incursion into Afghanistan was a direct threat to US oil interests in the Persian Gulf region (Cooley 2000: 17). Until 1979, the United States enjoyed favourable hegemonic conditions in the oil-rich Persian Gulf region. The fall of the Shah's regime in Iran in 1979 robbed Washington of a key ally, and presented an unsettled future for US interests. The old idea of Russian attempts to reach the warm water ports on the Indian Ocean was revived and played out loud in the corridors of power in the United States. Self-seeking diplomats such as Brzezinski introduced the US administration to the idea of controlling the Central Asian region, as that would be the 'ultimate arbiter' of American interests in the future (Brzezinski 1997).

In response to this strategic threat, the United States utilized the intelligence services of Egypt, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia to create, train and finance an international network of Islamic militants to fight the Russians in Afghanistan. To

fulfil this objective, the United States aided radical Islamists with traditional forces and encouraged Arab and Islamic states to support their own anti-Soviet proxies (Khalilzad and Byman 2000: 66). Apart from indirect military intervention, the United States also fought a propaganda war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan and the whole of what is now known as the Central Asian region. The operations introduced by the Carter administration were pursued earnestly by the Reagan administration that succeeded it. In fact, the Reagan government was far more committed to the cause than its predecessor was. It continued with an intensive propaganda war through radio campaigns (by using its mouth-piece Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty) to arouse and heighten religious passion among Afghans and Central Asians.

This move, it was believed, would create ethnic and religious consolidation among the inhabitants of the region, and help them rise up against the then Soviet state. Working closely with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) co-ordinated the war efforts in the region on several fronts. But one of the glaring contradictions of this mission was the promotion of Islamism throughout the region, on the one hand, and a sustained opposition to a successful Islamic country – namely, Iran – on the other.

In spite of this contradiction, the United States continued to wage its campaign against the Soviet Union through its proxy war in Afghanistan. In other words, Afghanistan provided the perfect battleground for the United States to unleash its power dynamics against Soviet Union. Washington succeeded in attaining its objectives when in 1988 the then Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev announced his government's decision to facilitate troops' withdrawal from Afghanistan. As a result, a complete pull-out of Soviet troops had taken place by 1989.

Once its strategic and ideological goals had been achieved, the United States came to regard Afghanistan as a liability. Washington was 'largely disinterested in the post-Soviet order of Afghanistan. Staying true to a script written back in the early years of the Cold War, having expediently used their Pak-

istani allies and the mujahidin to serve their ends, they simply turned their backs on the country' (Krishna 2002: 77). Predictably, it was abandoned in just the same way it was embraced by the United States when the Soviet tanks rolled into the country. With its strategic value gone, Washington would unplug itself from the developments there for 11 long years. Between 1989 and 2001, Afghanistan went from being one of Washington's top foreign policy priorities to one of the areas least important to it (Khalilzad and Byman 2000: 65).

## Pakistan

Pakistan's contribution to the 24-year-old conflict in Afghanistan has been immense. During the Soviet presence in the country, Pakistan assumed front-line status by default, and became the transit route for the supply of arms, ammunitions and military aid to Afghans fighting for their homeland. Pakistani generals and its secret service, the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI), worked in unison with US generals and the CIA towards a common goal. War strategies against the Soviets were planned, unveiled and implemented from here. Throughout this period, it served as the base for various disgruntled Afghan factions. Afghan political parties operated from here. Leaders were chosen or selected with the approval and blessing of Pakistan's generals and politicians.

Islamabad kept the mujahidin divided 'to the level where they would be coordinated enough to ease the need for Pakistani influence and control' (van de Goor and van Leeuwen 2000: 25). Pakistan received millions of Afghans displaced by the civil wars. It provided them with succour, and indoctrinated them with radicalism. When the Soviets retreated, it helped some of these radicals take over the country. The Taliban – as this group came to be known – received recognition from Pakistanis when the whole world shunned them. The current history of Afghanistan is intimately linked to Pakistan. No discussion of Afghanistan is complete without an analysis of the Pakistani contribution to war and peace in the region.

Thanks to its geographical, cultural and religious proximity to Afghanistan, Pakistan featured prominently in almost all UN, regional and bilateral peace initiatives. It was a natural partner in any discussion on Afghanistan's future. However, Pakistan was responsible for doing more harm than good. Unsurprisingly, it remained a potential threat to all peace proposals. Many an opportunity for settlement of conflict was marred due to Islamabad's obdurate role.

In the beginning, Islamabad's involvement in the Afghan conflict was a reflection of its domestic considerations. General Zia ul Haq, the Pakistani general who overthrew the popularly elected democratic government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, was desperate to create a popular base for his regime. The conflict in Afghanistan was an excellent opportunity for General Zia to shore up support for his regime. Pakistan's campaign in Afghanistan provided political legitimacy to Zia ul Haq's military rule. He gave a religious dimension to an external political issue in order to placate the extremist religious elements within the country. He succeeded in his endeavours by allowing the Muslims to take up the cause of the displaced, exiled Afghans in Afghanistan (Wriggins 1984; Wirsing 1991). The Pakistani ISI officially operated seven training camps where around 100,000 mujahidin fighters were trained to fight against the Soviet occupational force. Furthermore, ISI's involvement contributed massively to the smuggling of arms across the region and to trafficking of narcotics on a 'colossal scale' (Urban 1988; Kaplan 2001).

Pakistan not only shares a border with Afghanistan; it also has a significant Pashtun population in its northern areas. Since Pashtuns are an ethnic majority in Afghanistan, they have always interacted with their counterparts in Pakistan. Pakistan for its part has influenced Pashtun politics in Afghanistan through its own Pashtun population. This symbiotic relationship, however, has always been used to Pakistan's advantage. In other words, whenever the Pakistani government realized that its own interests were in danger, it masterfully manipulated the situation to its benefit. Fearful of Afghan irredentism on the issue of Pashtunistan, President

General Zia ul Haq introduced the concept of 'Strategic Depth', which not only included acquiring military decision-making authority in Afghanistan, but also helped to undermine a larger Afghan nationalism emerging there which could have threatened Pakistan's own ethnic patchwork by promoting Pashtun separatism.

Host to Pashtun refugees fleeing Afghanistan, Pakistan was instrumental in initiating them into Islamic fanaticism and warmongering in its countless madrasahs, or religious schools, as we shall see in the chapter on the Taliban. By 1992, however, these students had become too numerous for Pakistan to handle. The Chief Minister of the North-West Frontier Province was of the opinion that unless sent across the border, 'the juvenile fanatics in the madrasahs would certainly destabilise what was left of Pakistan' (Ali 2000: 135).

Political opportunism was one of the key features of Islamabad's approach to the conflict in Afghanistan, and it remains so. By 'exercising its leverage over the country's landlocked status, as well as exerting its historical influence, Pakistan played a vital role in shifting Afghanistan's political and military dynamics' in favour of itself (Ahmed 2001: 84). Islamabad nurtured, supported and promoted political parties, ethnic factions, religious groups, warlords and political leaders if they appeared to be subservient to Pakistan's long-term interest. In other words, Pakistan actively pursued a policy of strategic offence against any group or faction which was inimical to Pakistani interests. It created leaders, then pulled the carpet from under their feet if they tried to be independent of Islamabad. Pakistan's involvement in the conflict was underlain by geostrategic considerations.

Pakistan hoped that consolidation of the mujahidin victory over the Soviets would provide it with a secure northern corridor, and potentially ward off any co-ordinated attack from its arch-rival India and the Soviet Union, which were bound by a friendship treaty going back to 1971. In addition, Pakistan's interventionist policies in Afghanistan in the 1990s were steeped in a wide range of objectives, including attempts to gain access to the oil and gas resources of Central Asia via

Afghan territory, to undermine Iran's influence in South-west and Central Asia, and to gain strategic depth against India in its proxy war in Kashmir (Ahmed 2001: 86).

In the end, Afghanistan's tragedy was Pakistan's gain. A cost-benefit analysis of the conflict suggests that Islamabad received close to US \$8 billion from the United States and Saudi Arabia during this campaign. This economic largesse not only spruced up its defence establishment *vis-à-vis* the arch-rival India, but the aid also contributed to the country's fiscal growth and had an effect on the larger socio-economic development (Wirsing 1991; Kaplan 2001).

## Iran

Afghanistan and Iran share an overlapping history, geographical terrain and language. The cultural influence of Iran over Afghanistan is immense. A significant minority in Afghanistan – namely, Tajiks and Hazaras – speak a variant of Persian known as Dari. Besides this cultural factor, Iran is linked to Afghanistan by a key religious consideration. Almost 15 per cent of the ethnic Hazaras belong to the Shi'a sect, making them the fourth largest Shi'a community in the world after Iran, Iraq and Lebanon. Teheran views the fate of Hazaras in Afghanistan with extreme anxiety. Understandably, its response to the conflict in Afghanistan is driven by this key concern. From time to time, it supported and propped up various Shi'a political factions, in order to give them a voice in the political process in the country.

This support ranged from moral, economic, political and, on occasion, limited military aid. Interestingly, Iran also established alliances and strategic partnerships with all those non-Shi'a factions that revolted against any ethno-religious conformism. For example, during the early years of civil war, it promoted an umbrella organization called Hizb-i-Wahadat Islami Afghanistan (the Islamic Unity Party of Afghanistan, HWAI). However, when its influence in the political process waned, it shifted its support to another political front, called Jamiat-i-Islami.

The shifting nature of Teheran's diplomatic overtures is partly a reflection of its failure to find a viable solution to the Shi'a minority question. Teheran devoted considerable energy and effort to persuading the mujahidin leadership to allow substantial autonomy, and conceded as much as 25 per cent of the representation in the proposed interim Afghan government that came into being after the Soviet withdrawal. Nevertheless, no such concession was allowed. Having failed to arrive at a settlement, Teheran now made overtures to the Moscow-backed regime of President Najibullah. Fortunately, Najibullah's government gave assurances to Teheran that it would not interfere with the *de facto* autonomy of the Hazarajat, a region over which it had little or no control. But this sat ill at ease with the mujahidin alliance that was trying to build a united coalition against Najibullah's government. Naturally, once Najibullah was deposed, the persecution of Hazaras began in earnest.

Although the issue of Shi'a minorities was among its priorities, Teheran also had greater geopolitical ambitions. Following the breakup of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the Islamic Central Asian Republics, opportunities for Iran to provide a sea route for Central Asian trade loomed large. The success of this plan, from planning to operational stage, was dependent on Afghanistan providing a land corridor for goods to be ferried from Bandar Abbas, the Iranian port on the Indian Ocean. Iran's regional trade ambitions, however, undermined Pakistan's own objectives in the same region. Iran's move to reach out to Central Asia was thwarted by Pakistan.

Arguably, Iran's 'assets', such as its historical, cultural, ethnic and religious links, enabled it to play an important role in the political developments in Afghanistan (Tarock 1999: 818). In diplomacy, and especially in its involvements in the issue of Hazarajat, Iran has amply demonstrated that it has, and will always have, a significant stake in the political process in Afghanistan. Thanks to Teheran's renewed interest in the Shi'ite population in Afghanistan, a new Hazara nationalism is coalescing in the central regions of the country. Iran would like to see the emergence of a federal Afghanistan

where the rights of the Shi'a population are respected and secured.

## **Saudi Arabia**

Saudi Arabia's involvement in the conflict in Afghanistan can be divided into two phases. The first phase covered the years of Soviet occupation of the country until the rise to power of the Taliban. Whereas the involvement in the first phase was indirect, in the second phase it was upgraded to a direct interaction. This was made possible following the Saudi recognition of the Taliban regime and the establishment of diplomatic relations with it, while the entire international community shunned it.

Saudi Arabia had long been a bulwark of anti-communism, its rulers playing the role of major contributors of anti-leftist forces around the world – be it in Angola, Mozambique, Portugal or Italy. The fact that Afghanistan had an almost 100 per cent Muslim population was an additional incentive to Riyadh (Hiro 1999: 2). During the mujahidin offensive against the Soviets, Saudi Arabia assumed the role of a major contributor to the war efforts. Saudi Arabia was brought into the alliance against the Soviets because of its willingness to match US funds to the mujahidin (Hartman 2002: 478). The dividend for the Saudis following their partnership in this alliance was immense. Saudi Arabia formed a strategic partnership with the United States and Pakistan to undermine Soviet authority and gain influence in the region. It is estimated that the US–Saudi–Pakistani alliance's financing, training and arming of the mujahidin cost some US \$40 billion, and Saudi Arabia contributed almost half of this amount. Saudi involvement in this campaign, however, was not confined to its opposition to communism alone.

The conflict in Afghanistan was a momentary opportunity for Saudi Arabia to export its brand of Sunni Wahabi Islam in the face of Iranian effort to bolster Shi'a ideology in the region (Saikal 1998). Alongside Saudi government assistance,

unofficial parallel involvement by private individuals in Afghan affairs played a crucial role in determining the future of Afghanistan. This led to the arrival of a growing stream of freelance activists and groups arriving in Afghanistan and Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan with a mission to convert people to Saudi religio-political doctrine with fervent zeal. These soldiers of religious fortune often fought alongside mujahidin forces, and engaged in extreme violence against those who opposed them. But their influence in the political process was limited. However, their fortunes took a dramatic turn for the better when the Taliban forces marched into Afghanistan from Pakistan and took with them the doctrinaire views espoused by the Saudis.

For both strategic and ideological reasons, Saudi Arabia supported the Taliban's contest for power in Afghanistan. As mentioned earlier, when the Taliban wrested authority from the retreating mujahidin, Saudi Arabia was among only three countries to recognize the new regime. First, the ideological explanations: the Taliban's interpretation of Islam was close to the heart of the Saudi religious outlook. Both subjected women to male domination. Shari'a, the system of Islamic law, was applied in the two societies. Each strictly followed rules regarding social mores and customs as prescribed by the Qur'an and Hadith. Second, from a strategic perspective, Saudis embraced the Taliban in order to isolate Iran.

Ever since the emergence of Islamic republics in the Central Asian region in the 1990s, Teheran had tried hard to build bridges to further Iran's ideological and strategic interests in the region. Furtherance of such influence, however, was directly in opposition to Saudi Arabia, which nurtured similar visions. The domestic lobbies in both countries were equally vigorous in forcing their respective governments to take a firm stand in relation to Afghanistan. Many Saudi financiers had spent considerable effort and energy on the proposed oil and gas pipeline through Afghanistan. That economic imperative was a further incentive to the Saudi government to remain engaged in the unfolding political process in Afghanistan.

## Non-state actors

A little known aspect of the conflict in Afghanistan is the corporate battle for control over this strategic land mass in the post-Cold War era. While various states vied with each other and fought proxy wars in Afghanistan for power projection, influence or glory, many corporate houses (mainly American oil companies) joined the fray to facilitate and further their business interests. Two interrelated factors account for their attempt to have a stake in Afghanistan's future.

First, the 1990s were marked by the Gulf War. This incident reduced the area of operation of these companies. Second, the Palestinian–Israeli imbroglio created massive anti-Americanism in the region, and in turn compromised the interest of these corporate houses. These events necessitated the search for alternative sources of oil. Fortunately, the conflicts in the Middle East coincided with the emergence of several newly independent states in the Caucasus and Central Asian region. With proved gas and oil reserves, this region became an effective substitute for Middle Eastern oilfields.

To many US oil corporations, exploitation of this vital resource depended on its export to the energy-hungry West. There were two possible routes to channel the oil and gas reserves from the Caspian Sea and Central Asia: one going through the volatile and unstable Caucasus region, the other through Afghanistan and Pakistan. Of these two routes, the second was argued to be the most viable.

While the US administration followed 'a hands off policy' on Afghanistan in the aftermath of Soviet withdrawal from the country, American oil companies were seriously exploring the possibilities of building oil and gas pipelines through Afghanistan in order to transport Central Asian and Caspian Sea oil. With that objective in mind, an unofficial channel was opened in the US administration that sought to broker a deal with the new Afghan government. Interestingly, two key figures in current Afghan politics – namely, President Hamid Karzai and the US Special Representative for Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad (both then working for the US oil con-

glomerate UNOCAL) – were at the forefront of brokering a deal with the Taliban regime. Any serious progress in this direction, however, was stalled by the Taliban regime’s international isolation and allegations of involvement in the export of terrorism.

Although these non-state actors failed to construct the targeted pipeline through Afghanistan, they were none the less successful in convincing the US administration of the future economic significance of the region. Following the events of 11 September, Afghanistan once again regained its strategic importance. These twin factors – oil and strategic geography – convinced the USA that Afghanistan held the key to its future role as the security and resources manager in the region. In the current geostrategic arrangement, Afghanistan has become directly or indirectly entangled in what is ubiquitously termed by scholars ‘pipelinistan politics’. In the new geography of conflict over resources, control of Afghanistan is like controlling the sea route to India during the Age of Discovery. Indeed, the United States would be very reluctant not to take advantage of Afghanistan’s location for the furtherance of its own interest.

## **Afghan strategic culture**

The Afghans have indeed had a tragic fate, and a sense of sadness, of the historical wrongs and misfortunes that accompany them, is encoded deep within their consciousness. Yet, during the past 200 years of their modern history, Afghans have always managed eventually to outwit anyone with the impudence to try controlling their fate. The grim and brutal recollections that Afghans hoard in their national memory in turn produced a strategic culture, which has remained unique to this day.

Judging by their tortuous and chequered history, it would be safe to argue that Afghans represent the only society of its kind with a long line of unbroken involvement in guerrilla warfare. Their frequent marshalling of various armed tactics to further their cause indicates the importance that Afghans

attach to their independence. Their unresponsiveness to centralized control, their ability to subsist on little, and their continuous warfare among themselves have made them formidable enemies. Unsurprisingly, when confronted with an external enemy on their own ground, the Afghans make use of their strategic inheritance, warrior skills and superior knowledge of the landscape ‘to fight fierce and cunningly’ (Keegan 1985: 98).

External invasions in fact produced a culture of intense strategic sophistication among various tribes in the country. They not only excelled in the art of guerrilla warfare, but gained formidable mastery in forging political alliances, treaties and what might be called a ‘balance of power’ throughout the country’s ancient and modern political history. And they liberally engaged in political duplicity if it proved to their advantage. The stark manifestation of this strategy is the construction of ‘short-term alliances between traditional enemies in the face of a common external threat’ (Goodson 2001: 26). From the time of Alexander the Great to the Soviets, all major external powers who tried to compromise Afghans’ freedom and independence faced a hitherto fractional enemy coming together almost overnight and forgetting all their ancient feuds in order to face the challenge posed by the alien invader.

According to one critic, ‘two Afghan tribes might fight each other to death for control of power or resources, but the mere presence of an external force in their frontier would weld them together in a common cause i.e. the protection of the Afghan state and its *izzat* or honour’ (L. Dupree 1997: 330). All great rulers and military men, including the great Persian warrior Darius, the Greek military genius Alexander the Great, the Saka emperor Kanishka, and the formidable Islamic strategist Tamerlane, who at one time or another tried to control Afghanistan or made attempts to include it in their empire came to realize that the inhabitants of this land would never give in to complete subjugation or imposition of an alien rule. Arrian, the chronicler of Alexander the Great’s military campaigns in Asia, highlights how, after several unsuccessful attempts to introduce his own method of governance,

Alexander conceded to the inhabitants the retention of their local autonomy.

The clamour for communal, tribal or regional autonomy survives to this day. This is reflected not only from an external perspective, but is equally true of internal power sharing and power projection. Afghan opposition to any form of dominance by one tribal or ethnic group over another is legendary. For instance, 'no Pashtun likes to be ruled by another, particularly someone from another tribe, sub-tribe or section' (Kaplan 1994: 63). All forms of expansionist overture by one tribal group or another have faced fierce opposition.

This suspicion of all forms of power projection is not confined to ethnic and tribal boundaries, but equally affects regional ones. For instance, 'over most of the country outside the cities and towns, where at least nine-tenths of the population live, the inhabitants have traditionally run their own affairs, with little outside interference and the state has never been strong enough to establish effective control throughout the countryside' (Ewans 2001: 8). Although culture plays a key part in this attitude, geography none the less is a significant factor in this way of thinking.

## Conclusion

Throughout its troubled and chequered history, Afghanistan reveals the story of 'a piece of real estate trying to become a nation-state, its external patterns uncontrollably linked with those outside its territory' (L. Dupree 1997: 415). So long as geography plays a role in history, Afghanistan will remain what it has been since prehistoric times: the defence perimeter of the Indian subcontinent, crucial to access from the Eurasian land mass to the Indic plains, the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean (Klass 1990: 6). On the other hand, geography will continue to hamper Afghan attempts to build a strong political system and a viable economic state (Gopalakrishnan 1982: 50).

While the conflict in Afghanistan was an ideological war, the players involved in it had their own specific interpreta-

tions of the conflict, and therefore did not fully appreciate the long-term objectives of each other. In the case of the Soviets and the Americans, it was primarily a tug of war over the extension of their own Communist and capitalist visions, respectively. And Afghanistan happened to be the testing ground to gauge each other's strength. For all those Afghan and Islamic resistance fighters, however, the conflict was a war of liberation: liberation from the nefarious designs of the non-Islamic world. In their involvement in the conflict in Afghanistan, Islamic resistance fighters realized for the first time that their own sacred geography was being violated not only by the Soviets but also by the United States and its allies throughout the Islamic world.

The war against the Soviet occupational army created a sense of nationhood among Afghans, but this wartime wedding had its obvious limitations. The war temporarily buried antagonistic designs of various ethno-religious and tribal factions, but fell far short of producing an effective mainstream identity. Therefore, the withdrawal of the Soviets from Afghanistan did not necessarily mean the end of their objective. On the contrary, it presented them with a new set of tasks that involved identifying other Islamic territories where forms of external non-Islamic domination were in existence.