

AFGHAN GEOPOLITICAL CHESSBOARD: THE INTERPLAY OF INTEREST GROUPS AND PERSISTENT INSTABILITY

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Abstract

Afghanistan has historically been under the attention of the superpower and the corrupt. Afghanistan has long been at the center of geopolitical rivalries, with external interventions exacerbating its socio-political instability). Therefore, the continuous interventions of nations and the competition of the major trans-regional and global powers have caused the crisis in Afghanistan. We assess how foreign interests and external interventions contribute to Afghanistan's instability through a historical and analytical approach. This study employs a historical and analytical approach to examine the impact of global and regional power dynamics on Afghanistan's persistent crises. The research findings show that there are many factors contributing to the country's crisis and instability: Global regional and trans-regional factors are at the root; the country has experienced prolonged periods of civil war; ethnic and tribal division; and playing in the hands of external factors, weak government, etc. are major factors that need to be considered.

Keyword: Political Instability, External Interventions, Geopolitical Rivalries, Regional Security, Socio-Economic Challenges

Introduction

Afghanistan has a semi-arid climate and is geographically diverse and mountainous. This country's social structure has been shaped by inequalities like deep-seated ethnic, gender, economic, and geographical inequalities, alongside its tradition of hospitality. Additionally, Afghanistan's unique geographical location has attracted the attention of international actors at various times, complicating the country's situation and causing crises at domestic, regional, and global levels.¹ Following the 1919 Third Anglo-

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¹ Nizamuddin Nazari, The role of geopolitical factors in regional and trans-regional powers in continuing Afghanistan crisis, *Archives of Pharmacy Practice*, 11 (1), (2020), 1, 83.

Afghan War, commonly referred to in Afghanistan as the War of Independence, Afghanistan secured its sovereignty from British rule. Before this conflict, Afghanistan was classified as a "British Protected State," with its foreign policy dominated by British interests. Emir Amanullah Khan led Afghanistan to victory, forcing Britain to recognize its independence. This marked a significant shift in the region, ending decades of British influence. However, the geopolitical implications extended beyond independence. The establishment of the Durand Line, a boundary between Afghanistan and British India, remains a contentious issue, reflecting Britain's strategic interests in the region. This war not only redefined Afghanistan's status but also set the stage for future geopolitical rivalries². Some think the British lost this battle on purpose for geopolitical reasons, so that the boundary between Afghanistan and British India might be clearly drawn as the Durand Line³.

Therefore, the country has suffered profound human suffering since the 1973 coup due to political instability, regime changes, foreign invasions, civil wars, and other forms of political oppression (The Third Anglo-Afghan War (1919) and the 1973 coup are part of a continuum in Afghanistan's history of political instability. While the former marked the country's liberation from British control, it did not address underlying domestic issues, such as ethnic divisions, tribal rivalries, and weak governance. These unresolved issues contributed to decades of instability, culminating in the 1973 coup. The coup, in turn, opened the door to further foreign interventions and civil wars, illustrating the enduring challenges of achieving stable governance in Afghanistan.)⁴. For instance, the Soviet invasion in the December 24, 1979, Afghanistan has been embroiled in internal strife, with various factions vying for power and influence. The involvement of external players such as Russia, the USA, China, Pakistan and India has further complicated the political landscape, shaped the country's trajectory and exacerbated existing tensions. The strategic interests of these external actors have often clashed, leading to a protracted conflict that has had spill-over effects on regional security dynamics.

However, the US engaged in war against Afghanistan and tried to invade in the name of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, which hit the country and its environs more aggressively. The purpose of the invasion was military and political

² Luis Dupree, *Afghanistan*. (Princeton University Press, 1980)

³ Ejaz Hussain, & Jahanzaib, M. *Afghanistan: The western withdrawal and its implications for security and economy*. Heidelberg Papers in South Asian and Comparative Politics 77, (Universität Heidelberg, 2015)

⁴ Muhammad Daood Qayomi, New Paths and Policies Towards Conflict Resolution in Afghanistan: External-domestic perspective. *International Journal of Peace and Conflict Studies*, 8(1), (2023), 1-11. & Rubin, B. R., *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System*. (Yale University Press, 2002).

control⁵. This protracted US-created unrest in Afghanistan has affected the political, economic, social, and other sectors of the lives of the Afghan people. Over 4,000 soldiers have died and many more have been injured in Afghanistan as a result of the United States' (US) long-term presence, which has cost more than US\$2 trillion. Afghanistan has suffered greatly from the withdrawal of forces led by the US and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in terms of security, economics, financial management, and social cohesion. An important concern is how the administration run by the Taliban intends to close this gap. With about 40 million people, including Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Nuristanis, and others, Afghanistan boasts one of the most complex societies in the world⁶.

With the help of Pakistan and convened in Qatar in February 2020, the "Peace Agreement" between the Taliban and the United States essentially replaced the Bonn process with the "Doha Process." Many self-appointed local and foreign physicians have compounded the country's agony by prescribing prescriptions that do not address its ailments or its magnitude⁷. President Joe Biden declared in April 2021 that American forces would leave Afghanistan by September of the same year. The Taliban increased their attacks against the Afghan state in an effort to take control of every region, even in the face of continuing peace talks with the Afghan government. They seized checkpoints and bases of the Afghan Security Forces (ANDSF) with great speed, gradually annexing more land. The United States military also slowed the pace of its personnel departures in 2021. The United States had completed around 95% of the pullout by July 2021, leaving just 650 troops in Kabul to guard the American embassy.⁸

Several key factors have contributed to political instability in Afghanistan: such as, external Interventions: Afghanistan has been a battleground for various external powers throughout history, including the Soviet Union's invasion in 1979 and the US-led intervention in 2001⁹. These interventions have fueled conflicts and exacerbated internal divisions. Secondly, Afghanistan has experienced prolonged periods of civil war, particularly in

⁵ Muhammad Younus, & Aisha Shahzad, Democracy in Afghanistan and External Actors. *Journal of Arts & Social Sciences*, 7(1), (2020), available at: <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/1291/3ec614fb6180809504e36abe3aecaf457d8e.pdf>

⁶ Sabbir Ahmed, Shawon Talukdar, & Amimul Islam, Quest For Stability In Afghanistan: Problems And Prospects. *Journal of International Affairs*, 4(2), 2021, available at: DOI <https://www.doi.org/10.56888/BIJSSj2022v43n4a3>

⁷ Mohammad Dawood Qayomi, New Paths and Policies Towards Conflict Resolution in Afghanistan: External-domestic perspective. *International Journal of Peace and Conflict Studies*, 8(1), (2023), 1-11.

⁸ Bhaswat Prakash, *Afghanistan Crisis and The Global Impact with Effect to Taliban Take Over*, (Ajeenkya DY Patil University, Pune, 2021).

⁹ Junaied S Ahmad & Sobia Jamil, An Analysis of South Asian Security Complexes through the lens of Regional Security Complex Theory. *Journal of Politics and International Studies*, 6(1) (2023), available at: <https://jpis.pu.edu.pk/45/article/view/64>.

the late 20th century. Internal conflicts between various factions have hindered peace and stability. Thirdly, ethnic and tribal divisions: Afghanistan's diverse ethnic and tribal makeup often leads to tensions and power struggles among different groups, complicating governance and stability. Fourthly, militant groups: The presence of perceived militant groups such as the Taliban has perpetuated violence and insecurity in the country, undermining efforts towards peace and stability. Fifthly, weak governance: Afghanistan struggles with weak governance structures, corruption, and a lack of effective institutions, which have impeded progress towards stability and development. Sixthly, socio-economic challenges: poverty, lack of infrastructure, and limited access to basic services have significantly contributed to social unrest and instability in Afghanistan. Lastly, external interests: The strategic interests of neighboring countries and global powers in Afghanistan often result in competing agendas and interventions, further destabilizing the region.¹⁰

Literature review

This Political instability has long plagued Afghanistan, having far-reaching consequences for both the country and its environs, particularly South Asia. Due to the complex web of past disputes, outside interventions, and socioeconomic challenges, there are ongoing dangers to peace and security in this unstable environment.¹¹ Moreover, the socio-economic consequences of instability in Afghanistan have been severe, with corruption, lack of investment, and underdevelopment hindering economic growth and perpetuating poverty. The need for sustainable development initiatives to address these challenges is paramount for fostering stability and prosperity in the region.¹² Various studies have been conducted to described these issues in detail. Teresa (2011) viewed Afghanistan as a failed state because of the instability surrounding the country, which was hampered by internal disputes, security concerns, political unrest, and the ongoing danger of Islamic insurgency. She pleaded with the media and the whole community to see it as a legitimate state. In their 2010 discussion of the Afghan administration, Barfield and Najumi recommended that instead of imposing fear on people, they should have open talks about the kind of government they desire. Rudra and Shende concentrate on India's post-US exit plan in Afghanistan. The best

¹⁰ Ejaz Hussain & Muhammad Jahanzaib, Afghanistan: The western withdrawal and its implications for security and economy. *Heidelberg Papers in South Asian and Comparative Politics*, (77). (2015).

¹¹ Nizamuddin Nazari, The role of geopolitical factors in regional and trans-regional powers in continuing Afghanistan crisis. *Archives of Pharmacy Practice*, (2020), 1, 83.

¹² Mohammad Younus & Aisha Shahzad. Democracy in Afghanistan and External Actors. *Journal of Arts & Social Sciences*, 7(1), (2020), available at: [https://doi.org/10.46662/jass-vol7-iss1-2020\(53-66\)](https://doi.org/10.46662/jass-vol7-iss1-2020(53-66))

way for India to further its objectives is to designate a special ambassador who will work toward Afghan reconciliation. Engagement with the main actors around the globe, together with diplomatic efforts and development assistance, is vital in Afghanistan.

Zahoor Ahmad Wani (2021) examined the rise of the new Taliban and their dominance in non-Pashtun areas, attributing it to the highly fragile nature of Afghanistan's political environment. He posits that the new Taliban will prove to be a formidable force with an agenda for peace and stability across the Pak-Afghan region. Wani notes that most of the new Taliban forces are composed of non-Pashtun majorities, especially those who had supported the NATO forces led by the U.S. against the Taliban. However, we now see a reversal of this foundation with the Taliban-led government in power.

Shahzad Qazi (2010) reviews the U.S.-led counter-insurgency efforts in Afghanistan, labeling them as failures due to short-term policies, local power dynamics, ethnic and cultural divides, and violations of the U.S. counter-insurgency doctrine. Samira Imran (2019) examines the China-U.S. intervention in Afghanistan and its impact on security and stability in the South Asian region, with a specific focus on Pakistan-India and Afghanistan-Pakistan relations. Leone Kohn (2021) investigates the justification for U.S. intervention in Afghanistan, arguing that this intervention has played a significant role in the country's state failure.

This research aims to examine the socio-economic ramifications and foreign actors that contribute to Afghanistan's political instability. With a special emphasis on the consequences for its neighbors, the study focuses on how this instability affects regional security dynamics. The research intends to give insights into the intricacies of the situation and ideas for supporting peace, stability, and prosperity in the area by evaluating the role of external powers, including Russia, the USA, China, and India in defining Afghanistan's political landscape.

Objectives:

- To explore how external powers have historically influenced political instability in Afghanistan.
- To investigate the role of national and local groups in advancing the interests of external actors within Afghanistan.
- To examine the socio-economic implications of external interventions on Afghanistan and neighboring South and Central Asian governments.

Research Questions

- How external powers historically shaped political instability in Afghanistan?

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- How national and local groups with diverse ethnic compositions been used to protect the interests of external actors in Afghanistan?
 - What are the socio-economic consequences of external interventions on Afghanistan and its neighboring South and Central Asian states?

Research Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research design with a historical and analytical approach to investigate the role of external factors and foreign interests in contributing to Afghanistan's political instability. The focus is on understanding the interplay of external interventions and their socio-economic and political repercussions during a critical period in Afghanistan's history.

1. Research Design:

The study employs a historical qualitative design, which involves the systematic analysis of past events to understand how external powers have shaped Afghanistan's instability. This design is appropriate for tracing the evolution of foreign interventions and their long-term impacts.

2. Approach and Data Collection Methods:

- Documentary Analysis: Primary and secondary sources, including official reports, treaties, policy documents, and scholarly articles, are analyzed to identify patterns of foreign involvement and their effects on Afghanistan's political and socio-economic landscape.
- Content Analysis: Political speeches, news archives, and reports by international organizations are examined to understand how external actors justified their interventions and how local groups were leveraged to serve foreign interests.
- Case Studies: Specific events, such as the U.S. withdrawal in 2021 and the subsequent rise of the Taliban, are studied in detail to highlight the dynamics of foreign influence and internal instability.

Theoretical Framework

The Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), introduced by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, serves as a valuable framework to analyze the interplay of regional powers and their security interdependencies. This theory posits that the security dynamics of a region are shaped by the interactions of its states, influenced by their geographical proximity, shared challenges, and

interconnected interests.¹³ RSCT identifies regions as systems of interdependent security where the actions of one state significantly impact the security of others within the same complex. These dynamics are often driven by geographical contiguity, historical rivalries, and economic dependencies.¹⁴

Afghanistan's Role in the Regional Security Complex: Afghanistan's location places it at the center of a regional security complex involving South Asia (India, Pakistan), Central Asia, and global powers (USA, China, Russia). Competing interests—such as the U.S.'s counter-terrorism objectives, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), India's developmental aid, and Pakistan's strategic depth policy—create overlapping and conflicting security agendas. These interdependencies perpetuate instability rather than fostering stability.¹⁵

Afghanistan has historically been a battleground for superpower rivalries, such as during the Cold War when the U.S. and USSR used the country as a proxy for ideological warfare¹⁶. Post-2001, NATO interventions aimed at combating terrorism inadvertently heightened regional tensions, as neighboring states (e.g., Pakistan and Iran) responded by supporting proxy groups to safeguard their interests.¹⁷ Persistent Instability: RSCT highlights how external powers' interactions exacerbate Afghanistan's internal divisions. For example, Pakistan's influence on the Taliban and India's support for anti-Taliban factions reflect the theory's principle that external interests amplify local conflicts.¹⁸ These interactions have resulted in a lack of cohesive governance and prolonged socio-economic instability, mirroring RSCT's assertion that unresolved regional rivalries hinder local stability.

Understanding Afghanistan through RSCT helps policymakers identify the interwoven security dynamics. Addressing instability requires fostering cooperative security arrangements among regional powers to align their interests rather than competing for influence.¹⁹

Factors contributing political instability

Before delving into details, it is essential to examine the structure of Afghan society and its various ethnic groups. Afghan culture is not homogeneous, as it is a blend of different ethnicities, which is a source of pride for these groups but also a cause of conflict within Afghan society. The

¹³ Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*. (Cambridge University Press, 2003).

¹⁴ Buzan, 2003 & (Barfield, T., & Nojumi, N., 2010).

¹⁵ (Barfield, T., & Nojumi, N., 2010) & Qayomi, M. D. (2023).

¹⁶ (Buzan, 2003) & (Barfield, T., & Nojumi, N., 2010).

¹⁷ Mohammad Dawood Qayomi, "New Paths and Policies Towards Conflict Resolution in Afghanistan: External-Domestic Perspective". *International Journal of Peace and Conflict Studies* 8, (1), (March 16, 2023): 1-11, available at: <https://journals.rcmss.com/index.php/ijpcs/article/view/769>

¹⁸ Buzan, (2003) & Qayomi, M. D. (2023).

¹⁹ Barfield, T., & Nojumi, N., 2010

largest ethnic group by population are the Pashtuns, who make up approximately 42% of the Afghan population.²⁰ Following the Pashtuns, the second-largest ethnic group are the Tajiks, sometimes referred to as Farsiwan, meaning Persian-speaking. Tajiks constitute about a quarter of the population. Other significant ethnic groups include the Hazaras, who reside in the central regions of Afghanistan, and the Uzbeks, who are primarily found in northern Afghanistan. In the political landscape of Afghanistan, there is strong cohesion among major ethnic groups, except when confronted by a significant adversary ethnic group, such as the alliance between Hazaras and Uzbeks against the Pashtuns. Historically, Afghan politics has centered on which group would dominate and control the government, with the Pashtuns being the predominant force in Afghanistan. The Pashtuns have historically marginalized and at times oppressed smaller groups, which has led to enduring animosity.²¹

The interventions by foreign states and the various means they use to promote their interests in Afghanistan are well known. Afghanistan has been a playing field for different countries to flex their muscles. With many countries intervening in Afghanistan, each has its own distinct agenda. The United States and its allies used Afghanistan to counter the USSR, which was eager to use it as a testing ground for promoting its socialist ideology. The territory has been used, with the help of various regional countries, to foster terrorists in the form of al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Additionally, the roles of Pakistan and Iran in its politics highlight how these nations attempt to exploit Afghanistan's land and people for their own benefits.²²

The impending collapse of the democratic system in Afghanistan can also be attributed to the lack of favorable conditions for democracy in the region. Pakistan, governed by powerful military rulers, struggles to maintain its own democratic system. India, despite being a democracy, does not prioritize the promotion of democracy in its agenda concerning Afghanistan. Iran, as a Shia theocratic state, also has no interest in fostering democracy in Afghanistan. In fact, all these states support various groups politically and financially, which undermines Afghanistan's democratic system. This means that, in the absence of a regional actor promoting democracy, the people and government of

²⁰ Carol J. Riphenburg, Ethnicity and Civil Society in Contemporary Afghanistan, *Middle East Journal*, 59(1), (Middle East Institute, Winter 2005).

²¹ Muhammad Younus, & Aisha Shahzad, Democracy in Afghanistan and External Actors. *Journal of Arts & Social Sciences*, 7(1), (2020), available at: <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/1291/3ec614fb6180809504e36abe3aeca457d8e.pdf>

²² Didier Chaudet. Jihadism and instability in Pakistan: An analysis. *Rivista Di Studi Politici Internazionali*, 77(4), (2010), 531-546, available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42740973>

Afghanistan must work independently for the survival and development of their democracy.²³

As discussed above, Afghan society comprises various ethnic and interest-based groups. Thus, Afghan culture is not homogeneous, and the different sources of their origins and affiliations are considered a matter of pride for them. In this context, the first interest-based group to have fought the longest war in any country is the United States, which has played many significant roles. The U.S. sees itself as a stakeholder with certain material interests to be gained in and around Afghanistan. The interests of such actors shape the choices made, which in turn determine the course of action, i.e., policy outcomes. In other words, U.S. policy regarding Afghanistan involves engaging the nation's people to behave in ways that align with American perspectives. The U.S. rationally seeks to maximize its interests at a lower cost by involving other allied countries and groups. For the U.S. and other allies like India, this interest has led to decisions regarding conflicts that include human and material costs. To protect their interests, they support and finance those who advance their agendas. This results in security, instability, and economic consequences for the governments of South and Central Asia and the host country.

India is one of the largest, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, and multi-religious countries in the world. One of the biggest challenges in these countries is their large population, which makes the social system extremely complex, consisting of over 2000 castes with rigidly stratified groups and eight major religions. Considering that India is the largest economy in the region,²⁴ this economic power fosters interest and attempts to influence neighboring countries. Afghanistan's weak power structure, unpredictable political future, and cross-border dynamics make it an ideal target for India to assert its power and expand its role, especially under the umbrella of U.S. forces.²⁵ As a result, Indians have exploited and contributed to instability through militant sources and objectives, initiated development projects, and engaged in proxy warfare, exacerbating poverty, instability, ethnic conflicts, and fragility within the country.²⁶

²³ Muhammad Younus, & Aisha Shahzad, Democracy in Afghanistan and External Actors. *Journal of Arts & Social Sciences*, 7(1), (2020), available at: <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/1291/3ec614fb6180809504e36abe3aeca457d8e.pdf>

²⁴ Ashutosh Varshney, Ethnicity and ethnic Conflict (pp. 274-295) in Carles Boix & Susan C. Stokes (Eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199566020.003.0012>

²⁵ Talat Masood, Managing relations with Afghanistan. *Daily Tribune*, (May 17, 2016) available at <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1105131/managing-relations-with-afghanistan/>

²⁶ Sabbir Ahmed, Shawon Talukdar, & Amimul Islam, Quest For Stability In Afghanistan: Problems and Prospects. *Journal of International Affairs*, 4(2), 2021, available at: DOI <https://www.doi.org/10.56888/BISSj2022v43n4a3>

India has renegotiated the agreement to use Farkhor in Tajikistan as a base for aiding Afghanistan. Previously, India had constructed an airbase and a military hospital in support of the Northern Alliance. When the Taliban fell, the hospital was relocated to Kabul. During the Indian Defense Minister's visit to Dushanbe in April 2002, a bilateral agreement was signed. According to the agreement, India would provide training to Tajik defense professionals, maintain and repair Soviet and Russian military equipment, and offer English-language instruction to Air Force personnel.²⁷

Conclusion:

This study highlights the intricate dynamics of political instability in Afghanistan, driven by external interventions, internal divisions, and socio-economic challenges. It reveals how foreign powers have historically pursued their strategic interests in Afghanistan, often exacerbating the country's instability and affecting its neighbors, particularly South and Central Asia. The analysis underscores the role of external actors in shaping Afghanistan's trajectory and the impact of their interventions on regional security.

The findings point to the need for re-evaluating the strategies of external powers and their engagement with Afghanistan. Addressing instability requires a multi-pronged approach that includes reducing foreign interference, fostering inclusive governance, and addressing socio-economic inequalities that perpetuate unrest. By identifying these root causes, the study provides insights for crafting policies aimed at sustainable peace and stability in Afghanistan and the broader region.

Ultimately, the study calls for collaborative efforts among regional and global stakeholders to move beyond competition and promote shared goals of security, development, and prosperity in Afghanistan. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how geopolitical rivalries and interventions can destabilize regions and offers a roadmap for mitigating such impacts in the future.

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²⁷ Hamid Rasool, Afghanistan as a Factor in Central Asia's Security, *International Journal of Applied Social Science*, 6(5), (2019), 1340-44.

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