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## FOREIGN INVASIONS IN AFGHANISTAN: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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### ABSTRACT

Rare is the country that has sustained as many blows, and such hard blows, as has Afghanistan since its foundation in 1747. Afghanistan is the only country in the world that has experienced military occupation or intervention by three super powers in 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>th</sup> centuries; Great Britain twice in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; the Soviet Union in 1980s; and the United States of America in 2001. Nonetheless, the country has managed to survive and to retain some form of sovereignty and territorial integrity, despite numerous wars and invasions and swings between extremist ideological dispositions, ranging from tribalism value-systems to Marxism-Leninism and Islamic medievalism.

Afghanistan provides all too many examples of the wisdom of Winston Churchill's saying "those that fail to learn from history, are doomed to repeat it." Great Britain forgot the hard-learned lessons from the First Anglo-Afghan War (1839-42) and got caught in the misadventure of the second Anglo Afghan-War (1878-80). The Afghan communist government that took power in a military coup in 1978 did not appear to have learned from the failed westernization and reform experiment of King Amanullah (1919-29); it imposed radical changes and engaged in brutal repression, quickly stirring up a violent reaction that threatened the new regime. The Soviet Union optimistically viewed its military intervention in Afghanistan at the end of 1979 as a limited action with a short time horizon-assumption that proved unfounded and whose lack of realism would have been apparent from a review of Afghanistan history. And unfortunately the United States and its allies NATO did not get any lesson from the Soviet occupation when they initiated the international military intervention in Afghanistan after 9/11.

**KEY WORDS:** Foreign Intervention, NATO, Soviet Union, United States, Anglo-Afghan Wars, Jihad, New Great Game.

### I. INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan, though a landlocked state has undoubtedly enjoyed an eminent strategic location; because of its geostrategic location between the Persian Gulf, Central Asia, and the Indian subcontinent, Afghanistan had become a significant player in the world. This geopolitical situation has not only created a capacity for the Afghan rulers to spread their authority toward the eastern and western present borders, it also has made Afghanistan a tactical target for regional and international powers to reach their strategic destination. Because of its strategic location and proximity to the Arabian Sea, Afghanistan has been the battle ground of great-power rivalry for many centuries. Owing to its difficult terrain (harsh weather, barren land and scattered population), tricks of the popular guerrilla-style fighting and strong belief system, Afghanistan came to be famously known as the graveyard of empires. History is witness to the fact that the Afghans not let the foreign powers to control their land no matter how powerful they were.

Be it the Great Britain (1839-42 and 1878-80) for keeping its colonies in South Asia; the Soviet Union (1979-89) for spreading and preaching of Communism; or the United States of America and its allies NATO (2001-21), for the alleged war on terrorism – and finally the superpowers of their times, had to retreat one

by one from Afghanistan. They did not only end up unsuccessful in achieving their end goal, but also ended up losing precious lives, wealth, prestige and gained humiliation. As the history of Afghanistan reflects, it has now become obvious that the states that intervened in the internal matters of Afghanistan (or other countries), whether to preach communism or seek regime change, faced obstacles than benefits by interfering in the internal affairs of the country and challenging the people's values and belief system (Bilal, February 20, 2022).

Its position stride the ancient trade and invasion routes between East Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East once made Afghanistan a crossroads of cultures. In the modern era, however, it served as the end point of two expanded empires- Great Britain and Czarist Russia. However, Afghanistan's strategic position had been recognized for centuries, for the country was part of the Silk Road and in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a key player in the "Great Game" played between Great Britain and Czarist Russia. The political significance of Afghanistan again began to attract the attention of the Western world when the Soviet Union intervened in support of the Marxist government in Kabul in December 1979. Events in the 20<sup>th</sup> century can be seen as a legacy of the politics of the Great Game.





Britain's experiences fighting in Afghanistan during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries should have served as valuable lessons for other invaders, such as the Soviets in 1979 and U.S. in 2001 (Clements, 2003: xiii). The Soviets did not get lessons from the invasions (1839-42 and 1878-80) of the Great Britain on Afghanistan, and the United States did same mistakes as the Soviets in (1979-89) by their invasion of (2001-21) and all the three super powers faced humiliated defeat and finally withdrew their forces from Afghanistan.

## II. MATERIALS AND METHOD

For the purpose of the present study, the sources on foreign involvements and interferences in internal affairs of Afghanistan which caused the civil war and losses of lives and destruction of the country have been closely observed. To indicate the role and mistakes of foreign powers in Afghanistan, sources and data on the different stages and periods have been used. Beside the historical books, I also used Journals, essays, newspapers, maps, and documentaries about the interferences, invasions and mistakes of superpowers in Afghanistan.

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

### III. AREA OF STUDY: AFGHANISTAN

Afghanistan is a country with a myriad history inflicted with conflicts of interests among regional and international powers; specially neighboring countries. The super powers interferences in the internal affairs of Afghanistan lead to wars and political turmoil so much so that the country cannot be turned to a stable state. Foreign invasions and interferences in the internal affairs of Afghanistan caused political instability, economic difficulty and social crisis in the country. So, to now the roots of instability of Afghanistan to day, it is necessary to have a deep-look into the invasions of three super powers on Afghanistan in 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>th</sup> century, Great Britain, Soviet Union, and United States respectively.

### VI. RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

#### 1- Afghanistan as a Bridge and Connecting Point

Afghanistan as a nation-state begins with its foundation by Ahmad Shah Durrani in 1747 (Dupree, 1997: 14) but the history of its component parts is much older and more complex. Before the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, it was more renowned as a highway of conquest than a graveyard of empires. Located in a strategic zone linking Iran in the west, Central Asia in the north, and South Asia in the east and south, the territory of today's Afghanistan was the historic route of choice for armies moving across the Hindu Kush toward the plains of India. As a result, it is various regions were normally subsidiary parts of larger regional empires or constituted important frontiers of more powerful states (Byrd, October 1, 2012).

For a thousand years, Afghanistan and its neighbours had been living in a cultural environment created during the sudden expansion of Islam in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries. But well before 1800, the vast Muslim world had begun to lose the initiative in the face of the expanding civilization of Christian Europe. Afghanistan position astride the ancient trade and invasion routes between East Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East once made Afghanistan a crossroads of cultures. In the modern era, however, it served as the end point of two powerful empires – Great Britain and Czarist Russia. At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Afghanistan became directly involved in European empire politics. During this 'Great Game' as Kipling called it, Afghanistan became a buffer state. The rivalries of the two imperial powers led them to contain each other by fixing 'strategic frontiers', which were later endorsed bilaterally in the Anglo-Russian Convention of St Petersburg of 1907. (Rasanayagam, 2011: xvi).

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the confrontation between the expanding British and Russian empires for territory in Central Asia drastically impacted Afghanistan. Primarily, the British were concerned with the growing number of Russian forces encroaching into Central Asian Countries, most notably into India and Persia. This increasing aggression and escalating concern resulted in a series of three separate wars in Afghanistan, and this period in history is affectionately referred to as "The Great Game" (Runion, 2007: 67).

Nevertheless, at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Afghanistan became directly involved in European empire politics. In additions to Russia and Britain, France emerged as a contender in the "Great Game" for imperial conquest. The first contact between a British envoy, Mounstuart Elphinston and Afghan ruler, Shah Shuja (r. 1803-10 and 1839-42), took place at Peshawar in February 1809 and led to an alliance against a France-Persia invasion which, however, never materialized. The next, more fateful encounter was the first Anglo-Afghan War (1839-42). This period of Afghanistan's history was marked by the increasing interest of Britain in the internal affairs of the country, largely because of the Great Game being played out in the region with Russia. Afghanistan was been by Britain as a crucial buffer state, given the increasing power and widening interests of the Russian Empire in the region; British policy was determined by the demise to protect the security of its Indian Empire against the Russians, who were deemed to the greatest threat to British interests in the region (Clements, 2003: xvi).

The Anglo-Russian agreement of 1873 reflected the changed strategic situation in the region: the two colonial powers had come to a direct contact and decided to settle their differences peacefully. British statesmen "were willing to accept that Russian moves in Asia were guided by a legitimate desire to extend their commerce and to maintain the security of the Russian frontier" (Chakravarty, 1976: 20), whereas

Russia explicitly stated that “Afghanistan lay outside its zone of interest (Dupree, 1997: 407). Technically it was never a colony, but the Treaty of Gandamak (1879) had imposed limitations on the Emir’s sovereignty. As the Great Game played itself out, the Emir was forced to accept other infringements of his sovereignty (Rasanayagam, 2011: 9).

## ***2- Afghanistan’s History Has Longer Periods of Peace than Violence***

When asked about the possibility of bringing an end to war in Afghanistan in 2009, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper was pessimistic: “We are not going to ever defeat the insurgency. Afghanistan has probably had – my reading of Afghanistan history – it’s probably had an insurgency forever, of some kind.” (Byrd, October 1, 2012).

Indeed, for those who start their history of Afghanistan with the 1979 Soviet invasion, Afghanistan does appear to be plagued by continuous violence and incapable of governance. But these past four decades of disorder are a marked break with Afghanistan’s far more peaceful past that was characteristic of its longer history. Three examples make this clear:

A- Existence of dynastic ruling elite, first established by Ahmad Shah Durrani in 1747, which held continuous authority over Afghanistan for 230 years until the 1978 Communist coup. Although composed of rival and competing clans, such was the political prestige of this Durrani dynasty that non-royal insurgent factions always found it easier to agree to return power to them rather than see it pass to another group. The desire of some Afghans to see the then eighty-six year- old Zahir Shah restored to the throne after the Taliban was toppled in 2001 proved this old pattern was far from dead (Byrd, October 1, 2012).

B- Contrary to common belief – is that before 1978, insurgencies were rare in Afghanistan and lasted only a couple of years or less on each occasion. Indeed, there were no insurgencies against any Afghan government before the British invaded Afghanistan in the 19<sup>th</sup> century because until then, struggles for state power were contests among rival elites that did not require the participation of the rural population. When the rural population did take up arms for the first time against the British, their participation ceased soon after foreign troops departed (Ibid).

C- The belief that Afghans are unable to live at peace with one another is refuted by the fifty years of stability that followed the end of a nine-month civil war in 1929. In those decades, despite the absence of strong government institutions, Afghans or foreigners alike could travel safely throughout the country, and violence was rare. A 1975 attempt by Islamic radicals to begin an insurgency against the Afghan government failed so miserably within days that its leaders had to flee to Pakistan. Many of these men would later become mujahedin factions’ leaders in the Soviet War. However, their success then was because of external factors and not from any underlying domestic support (Ibid).

But if Afghanistan was stable in the past, what makes it so difficult to restore a peaceful equilibrium now? History is not always about continuity, but about disruption as well, and the disruptions to Afghan politics, social organization, and life experience over the past forty four years have been significant. The destructive legacy of the Soviet invasion cannot be underestimated. It lasted for a decade, led to the death of more than a million Afghans, and sent at least seven million refugees to neighboring Pakistan and Iran (Nojumi, 2002: 98). These large refugee movements added to the displaced internal populations that fled from the rural areas to the cities, upending existing mechanisms of social order and dispute resolution without providing good alternatives. The insurgency itself differed significantly from those against the British or internal Afghan civil wars. It was national and cross-ethnic, but so too was the Soviet-backed Kabul government it fought against. During this war, all factions depended on money and weapons supplied by foreign powers with their own ideological agendas. The Soviets and Americans both saw Afghanistan as part of a broader Cold War struggle in which the intrinsic value of the country and its people was a secondary factor. Saudi Arabia, keen to project its own religious values on a larger Islamic stage, funded radical Sunni Salafists, while Iran supported Afghan Shiites (Rasanayagam, 2011: 168). Pakistan saw the Afghan War as an opportunity to back factions willing to ally themselves with Islamabad in its regional competition with India. By the time the Soviets withdrew in 1989, the possibility of an internal Afghan peace settlement was too tied up in these international and regional rivalries to have much chances of success. The inconclusive civil war that ensued with the fall of the Communist regime in 1992 led to the rise of the Taliban in 1996 (Byrd, October 1, 2012).

The American invasion that toppled the Taliban so easily in 2001 just stopped not ended the civil war period. However, many millions of refugees returned to Afghanistan. What the invasion has failed to do over the twenty years was to create a stable foundation to maintain the stability and peace.

### 3- Mistakes of Regional and Super Powers

Over the past 170 years, Afghanistan has experienced four direct interventions by Western powers: two Anglo-Afghans Wars (1839-42 and 1878-80) in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a Soviet occupation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (1979-89), and an American-led invasion in 21<sup>st</sup> century (2001-21). The reasons each power chose to go into Afghanistan were quite different. The British saw Afghanistan as a bulwark for the defense of greater India against possible threats by an expanding Russia. By contrast, the Soviet Union intervened in Afghanistan for support of a failing client regime, fearful that it would appear weak if it did nothing to prevent the new revolutionary Afghan socialist government from collapsing (Arney, 1990: 110). The US invaded Afghanistan to topple the Taliban because they had provided the bases for the al-Qaeda terrorists who mounted the 9/11 attacks on the United States. But, whatever the reasons they chose to enter Afghanistan, all followed strikingly similar policies once they got there (Clements, 2003: xxix).

After their initial victories in the first Anglo-Afghan War, the British made the modernization of the Afghan state a top priority. They reorganized its administrative and financial structure, making it more efficient and substantially increasing the amount of tax revenue it collected. They abolished the old feudal military system based on land grants and replaced it with a much smaller professional army trained by British officers. They also had plans to reform the judicial system by using professional, state-appointed judges to replace the existing corps of Muslim clerics, whom they deemed hopelessly corrupt. Because the British found Afghan officials - including the ruler they had installed - reluctant to carry out these changes they appointed their own personnel to oversee the process within the Afghan government. Less intentionally, the British occupation of Kabul upset the old social order through its lavish spending in support of its troops and the massive infusion of currency. Afghans in Kabul complained that British contracts enriched the grain merchants who supplied them, starved the poor who could no longer afford the high prices, and made the chiefs living off fixed rents destitute. This made it easier for opponents to pain British administrative and economic changes as alien intrusions contrary to Afghan tradition. While in the long term such innovations made the state more powerful in Afghanistan, and were preserved by successor regimes, in the short term they undermined the British position and helped lay the basis for the broad insurgency that drove them from Afghanistan in 1840 (Byrd, October 1, 2012). During the Second Anglo-Afghan War, the British stayed clear of direct domestic administration interference, but their long-term plan was to dismember and incorporate smaller parts of Afghanistan into the Indian Raj as they had already done with Baluchistan and the Northwest Frontier Province. A change of policy in London reversed that aim in 1880, when the decision was made to keep Afghanistan an independent buffer state running its own affairs (Rasanayagam, 2011: xvi).

The Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979 to support the socialist regime there (Wahab and Youngerman, 2007: 152). It immediately restructured the Kabul government and security services to better resemble those they had used in other Soviet client states. Although the Russians reversed some of the more radical reforms favored by the Afghan Communists - and never attempted to introduce such Soviet institutions as collective farms - they nevertheless stood firmly behind an economy based on central planning and the primacy of a vanguard secular socialist party. They were also keen to make social reforms to ensure the rights of women, reduce the influence of the clergy, and expand secular education. Although the Afghan socialist regime enthusiastically backed these policies, such social issues had a contentious history in Afghanistan, and in 1929, the policies provoked a civil war that toppled the reforming King Amanullah (Byrd, October 1, 2012). Like the British almost a century and half earlier, the Soviets also installed its representatives in all Afghan ministries to ensure that government officials carry out planned reforms and train a new army. In this, they were frustrated by the existence of two rival party factions, Khalq and Parcham, which would not be induced to cooperate with one another. None of these projects ever reached completion. Soviet military and civilian advisers were completely withdrawn from Afghanistan when the Russians troops left in February 1989, although the regime in Kabul continued to receive substantial aid from Moscow until the Soviet Union itself collapsed in 1991 (Dorransoro, 2005: 237).

In both Anglo-Afghan wars and the Soviet invasion, London and Moscow presumed that a successful invasion alone would defeat the opposition, and they could set the terms on which a new government would operate. Any troops left behind after the invasions could expect only garrison duty. They were both ill-prepared for the insurgencies that arose later, and their home governments eventually decided to shift to policies of indirect support. Both British and Soviet policy changes followed the same trajectory. After their initial expectations of transforming Afghanistan's political structure and its people proved unrealistic, they became more open to letting the Afghans do things in their own way, and both redefined their benchmarks for success downward. Instead of seeking a total transformation of Afghanistan, they settled for finding an

Afghan leader who could keep control of the country with only “over the horizon” assistance. These indirect policies proved surprisingly successful (Byrd, October 1, 2012). Although none of the rulers brought to power by invading foreign armies could maintain stability in the country, those who came to power as foreign troops withdrew did. For instance, Dost Mohammad Khan, whom the British restored to the throne in 1843 after they had first deposed him in 1839, went on to rule Afghanistan for the next twenty years. Similarly, the Amir Abdul Rahman Khan, who took power in the wake of the British withdrawal in 1880, succeeded (with British subsidies and weapons) in building the strongest state in Afghan history by the time he died in 1901. Also, to the surprise of his Soviet backers, Najibullah used their civilian and military aid to keep his regime intact until 1992, when the dissolution of the Soviet Union left him without an international backer. With no major international backer, Afghanistan devolved into civil war, which led to the collapse of mujahedin government and the rise of the Taliban in the 1990s (Dorransoro, 2005: 237).

The US and its coalition partners face the same and similar path. For twenty years, they have pursued a policy of Afghan nation-building to create a highly centralized government with a robust security force, a democratic political system, and a market economy. They have also attempted to bring social Afghan norms in line with international values. These plans to reorganize Afghan society and government have proved far more difficult to implement than expected. They have also been more expensive than first anticipated and, when insurgencies emerged, demanded a military commitment that home governments were unwilling to maintain over the long term. It is not surprising, then, that the US and its allies NATO withdrawal of 15 August 2021, resembles similar periods in the past (Byrd, October 1, 2012).

## V. CONCLUSION

Afghanistan, though a landlocked state has undoubtedly enjoyed an eminent strategic location because of its geostrategic location between the Persian Gulf, Central Asia, and the Indian subcontinent, Afghanistan had become a significant player in the world. Because of its strategic location and proximity to the Arabian Sea, it has been the battle ground of great-powers rivalry for many centuries. Owing to its difficult terrain (harsh weather, barren land and scattered population), tricks of the popular guerrilla-style fighting and strong belief system, Afghanistan came to be famously known as the graveyard of great empires. History is witness to the fact that the Afghans not let the foreign powers to control their land no matter how powerful they were. Be it the Great Britain, the Soviet Union, or the United States of America and its allies NATO, the superpowers of their times, had to retreat one by one from Afghanistan. They did not only end up unsuccessful in achieving their end goal, but also ended up losing precious lives, wealth, prestige and gained humiliation.

In the modern time, Afghanistan has experienced four direct interventions by Western powers: two Anglo-Afghans Wars in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a Soviet occupation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and an American-led invasion in 21<sup>st</sup> century. The reasons each power chose to go into Afghanistan were quite different. The British saw Afghanistan as a bulwark for the defence of greater India against possible threats by an expanding Russia. By contrast, the Soviet Union intervened in Afghanistan in support of a failing client regime, fearful that it would appear weak if it did nothing to prevent the new revolutionary Afghan socialist government from collapsing. The US invaded Afghanistan to topple the Taliban because they had provided the bases and safe heaven for the al-Qaeda terrorists who mounted the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington. But, whatever the reasons they chose to enter Afghanistan, all followed strikingly similar policies once they got there.

Afghanistan provides all too many examples of the wisdom of Winston Churchill’s saying “those that fail to learn from history, are doomed to repeat it.” Great Britain forgot the hard-learned lessons from the First Anglo-Afghan War and got caught in the misadventure of the second Anglo Afghan-War. The Afghan communist government that took power in a military coup in 1978 did not appear to have learned from the failed westernization and reform experiment of King Amanullah; it imposed radical changes and engaged in brutal repression, quickly stirring up a violent reaction that threatened the new regime. The Soviet Union optimistically viewed its military intervention in Afghanistan at the end of 1979 as a limited action with a short time horizon-assumption that proved unfounded and whose lack of realism would have been apparent from a review of Afghanistan history. And it does not seem that the United States and its allies NATO reflected on lessons from the Soviet occupation when they initiated the international military intervention in Afghanistan.

As the history of Afghanistan reflects, it has now become obvious that the states that intervened in the internal matters of Afghanistan, whether to preach communism or seek regime change, faced obstacles than benefits by interfering in the country and challenging the people’s values and belief system. Foreigners first

entering Afghanistan attempted to remake it in their own image but discover the virtues of doing things the Afghan way then they wish to leave. All the three super powers faced humiliated defeat and finally withdrew their forces from Afghanistan. A review of that history by policymakers would pay great dividends.

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