FutureDirections international

INDEPENDENT STRATEGIC ANALYSIS OF AUSTRALIA'S GLOBAL INTERESTS

Strategic Analysis Paper

31 July 2018

The United States in South Asia: The Afghanistan Factor

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Key Points

- Afghanistan and the United States share a relationship that dates back to the early 1920s.
- That relationship, however, has been predicated upon providing advantage to the US.
- The US has used Afghanistan for its own ends time and again.
- This situation obtains at the present time and is likely to continue in the future.

Summary

Modern Afghanistan's history began in the eighteenth century when several Afghan tribes came together during the reign of Ahmed Shah Durrani. Afghanistan, in its modern form, was created with the signing of the Treaty of Rawalpindi in August 1919 and ruled by Emir (King) Amanullah Khan. In 1921, the Emir sent a delegation led by General Mohammed Wali Khan on a tour of Western countries to solicit diplomatic recognition for his newly-formed country. The Emir, opportunistic and ambitious but, most of all, progressive, had spent many years touring around Europe and was fascinated by the social, political and economic developments in the countries that he visited. The delegation returned with a letter of greetings from President Warren G. Harding of the United States. More importantly, the US recognised the sovereign state of Afghanistan in that letter; most probably because Washington recognised Afghanistan's strategically significant location at the crossroads of Asia. The subsequent exchange of official missions and correspondence led to full diplomatic

relations being established between the two countries in 1934. President Roosevelt appointed William Hornibrook as the first US Envoy to Afghanistan in 1935 and, in 1943, King Zahir Shah appointed Abdul Hussein Aziz as the first Afghan Ambassador to the US.

Rapidly-developing ties brought the creation of the Helmand Valley Authority Project, which saw the construction of houses, airports, highways and dams in the country. The US loaned Afghanistan US$20 million to construct the Kandahar-Herat highway in 1945 and, in 1954, extended that amount to US$51.75 million. President Dwight D. Eisenhower's visit to Afghanistan in December 1959 was soon followed by Afghan Prime Minister Dawood's visit to the US. He became the first Afghan to address the US Congress. In 1963, King Mohammad Zahir, with his wife, Queen Homeira, became the first Afghan Head of State to visit the US.

At that point, the bilateral relationship appeared to be destined to go from strength to strength.

Analysis

Despite the appearance of goodwill, the US loans and other investments in Afghanistan were based more on motivations of capitalistic returns on investment than humanitarian considerations. Many US firms prospected for oil in Afghanistan and, when that proved unsuccessful, returned to the US with the unequivocal message that Afghanistan did not offer much in terms of investment opportunity. This perspective on US investment in Afghanistan has validity: the greater part of international aid to Afghanistan was provided by the Soviet Union, with Moscow providing close to one billion US dollars (an estimated 60 per cent of all civilian aid) to Kabul by 1973.

The Cold War, however, changed the complacent US attitude towards Afghanistan. That struggle saw two systems, capitalism and communism, compete on the international stage for dominance. The leading purveyors of those systems, the US and the Soviet Union respectively, viewed each other with suspicion and examined closely each other's attempts to influence various countries. Any advantage gained by either side was portrayed as a triumph of the relevant political system. The US, nevertheless, had little interest in Afghanistan because its regional ally at the time, Reza Shah Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran, safeguarded Washington's interests, specifically oil, in the region, including Afghanistan, in exchange for economic and military aid and also because Afghanistan had few resources – and no oil – that were of interest to the US. Washington consequently paid little heed to growing Soviet-Afghan ties. So sanguine was the prevailing attitude, in fact, that a State Department record from as late as 1976 stated that: '[Afghanistan] is a militarily and politically neutral nation, effectively dependent on the Soviet Union' and concluded that the US 'is not, nor should it be, committed to, or responsible for the "protection" of Afghanistan in any respect.' In its essence, the US believed that the balance of power in the region favoured it and the Soviet relationship with Afghanistan did not threaten that construct.

The Shah's abdication of his throne in 1979 and the rise of a decidedly anti-US theocracy in Tehran upset that complacency. Washington's regional influence could no longer be taken for granted. It now began to describe the Soviet-Afghan relationship as a grave threat. That

concern grew when, in April 1978, King Mohammed Daud was overthrown and replaced by the pro-Soviet and Socialist-leaning People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). The PDPA, however, proved very unpopular with ordinary Afghans when it tried to turn Afghanistan into a copy of the Soviet Union, leading one author to observe that the policy was composed of 'equal parts brutality, stupidity and ineptitude'. It seized and re-distributed land at will, antagonising Afghan land owners, but it was its visible antipathy towards Islam that caused the most unrest and unified ordinary Afghans against it. It was that situation that Cooley claims gave rise to the US's "love affair with Islam". Washington and Islam now had a common enemy: the Soviet Union.

In early 1979, Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Carter's National Security Adviser, persuaded the National Security Council to support the Afghan rebel groups against the PDPA. The US soon after began meeting with the rebels. Brzezinski, however, revealed in an interview with France's *Le Nouvel Observateur* newspaper in 1998 that the CIA had begun providing covert aid to Afghan resistance fighters fully six months before the Soviet invasion in December 1979. In the same interview, he stated that the objective was to draw the Soviets into 'an Afghan trap' in order to 'have the opportunity of giving to the USSR its Vietnam War'. As a related aside, it is also to be noted that when he was asked if he regretted having supported Islamic fundamentalism, which has given arms and advice to future terrorists, Brzezinski replied, 'What is more important in world history? The Taliban or the collapse of the Soviet Empire? Some agitated Moslems or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the Cold War?' Afghanistan, it would appear, was of interest to the US, but only as a pawn in a much larger geopolitical game.

In the event, the US Congress invested around US$3 billion in funds, arms and other supplies for the rebel Afghan fighters, more than the combined total of the CIA's other operations in the 1980s.

Unable to sustain the cost of a demoralising and expensive war, General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev announced in February 1988 that the Soviet Union would withdraw its troops from Afghanistan. Soon after that announcement, the Soviet Union and the US signed the Geneva Accords, according to which both sides agreed not to intervene in Afghanistan and the Soviets agreed to start withdrawing their troops. The last Soviet soldier crossed the Amur Darya River into Uzbekistan on 15 February 1989.The Soviet adventure in Afghanistan had ended – as did the Soviet Union itself shortly thereafter.

The war in Afghanistan may have ended but the country was ruined and the US, just when it was most needed, left that situation to its erstwhile partners against the Soviets, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, to resolve and pulled its troops out of Afghanistan. More importantly perhaps, Washington curtailed its aid to Afghanistan dramatically and made no effort to rebuild the country, demobilise and disarm the fighter groups it had used during the war, or to consider any kind of relief plan to be put in place. Pakistan, convinced that India sought to destroy it, saw in Afghanistan the opportunity to create what its military termed "strategic depth" to thwart its neighbour's malign intentions. Saudi Arabia saw in Afghanistan the opportunity to balance its undeclared foe, Iran. The weakened Afghan Government found it difficult to control the many armed groups that now were spread around the country and to lift it from its economic malaise. It could not cater to the families who had lost male

members – estimated to be around one million men over the ten years of bloody warfare – let alone the three million Afghans who sought refuge in Pakistan. A power vacuum soon formed and groups of religious students, who had studied Islamic theology and little else, soon coalesced into a political and militant force.

Those students (singular "*Talib*", plural "*Taliban*") had in their ranks many men who had fought against the Soviet forces and the PDPA. They put their training and experience to good use. In 1996, they captured Kabul and declared themselves the legitimate rulers of Afghanistan, with various *mullahs* (religious teachers) as their leaders. They claimed that they would bring peace to the country and end the endemic corruption within it. The claims resonated with the general populace who wanted a normal life once again. The Taliban, however, soon fell back on their religious zealotry and put in place a harsh and unforgiving strain of Islam, one closely akin to the Wahhabi version of the religion that permeated Saudi Arabia. Rule in accordance with religious *diktat* became the norm and Afghanistan's economy went into free fall. Religious scholars, let alone students of theology, are seldom equipped to competently deal with the demands of modern economics.

The attacks on the US on 11 September 2001 saw Washington turn its attention towards Afghanistan once again. Its intelligence services soon determined that Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda group were behind the attacks. They also learned that, fearing retaliation for the attacks, he and members of his group allegedly sought refuge in the Tora Bora cave complex in Afghanistan, just west of the fabled Khyber Pass between that country and Pakistan. The cave complex had, ironically, been expanded using CIA funds to Afghan fighters in their war against the Soviets. When the Taliban leaders refused to capture and give him up to the US, Washington began a military campaign against them in conjunction with their war against al-Qaeda. The Taliban leaders, who had to deal with the fiercely anti-Taliban Northern Alliance and the US forces, saw their hold on power dissipate very quickly.

Soon after the Taliban lost power, the United Nations held a conference in Bonn to which the leaders of several Afghan factions were invited. This conference produced a consensus on a road map for political reconstruction and a transitional government. The UN Security Council approved the deployment of an International Security Assistance Force to Kabul. A Pashtun leader, Hamid Karzai, was chosen as the transitional leader by a *Loya Jirga* (Grand Council) of tribal leaders in June 2002. In January 2004, another Loya Jirga was convened, which approved the creation of a new Constitution. Presidential elections were held in October 2004 and Karzai became the first democratically-elected President of Afghanistan.

Despite these positive developments, the Taliban, who had not completely lost power or influence, continued to strike against targets owned by or loyal to the elected government. The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), which had taken command of the International Security Assistance Force in August 2003, moved its forces into the northern and western provinces of Afghanistan and, when the situation deteriorated further in 2006, began operations in the southern and eastern provinces, taking over from US-led coalition forces there.

US forces remained in Afghanistan, nevertheless, and played a large part in the security situation there, probably because Washington recognised, as did President Harding in the

1920s, the geopolitical advantages that Afghanistan offered in the twenty-first century against a new competitor, China, and also the economic benefits to be had.

It was reported (and elsewhere, including here) in 2010, that the Pentagon believed that Afghanistan's untapped mineral wealth could be worth around US$1 trillion. According to another report, the Afghan Government declared that figure to be around US$3 trillion, although that figure is likely an overestimate. According to the news report, a task force studying the country's resources found that Afghanistan has significant deposits of copper, iron ore, niobium, cobalt, gold, molybdenum, silver and aluminium, as well as sources of fluorspar, beryllium and lithium, among others. While even the one trillion dollar figure may be exaggerated, the fact remains that the country does have enormous unexploited mineral wealth. Even if another country did not avail of the minerals itself (an unlikely possibility or outcome), there could be much profit to be had in partnering with still-to-be-established Afghan mining companies, by providing the technology and expertise required, for example, in the extraction of those minerals.

More specifically, it is the discovery of major lithium deposits in Afghanistan that is of real consequence; one source provides an idea of the amounts of lithium available by referring to Afghanistan as "the Saudi Arabia of lithium". The original Pentagon report, while stating that the main minerals found were iron ore (estimated value US$421 billion) and copper (US$273 billion), was careful to note that the trillion dollar figure did not include known oil and gas reserves or the value of minerals like lithium that have not been verified to an extent that would permit a dollar figure estimation. While two Chinese firms have committed themselves to a US$4 billion investment in the vast Aynak copper mine, south of Kabul, it is the lithium deposits that are of strategic interest.

In the past few years, the demand for lithium has exploded along with the growth of lithium-ion battery technology in mobile phones, personal digital assistants, laptop computers and, more recently, electric vehicles and batteries that can be attached to solar-powered systems. China, which seeks to position itself as a major manufacturer of electric-powered automobiles and solar panels, could see its plans disrupted and, more importantly, at the mercy of, for instance, American firms that might come to control lithium production in Afghanistan.

The US will want to counter any benefit that China may gain from that situation. By retaining its forces in Afghanistan, moreover, the US could potentially keep a close watch on Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative, a massive project that has the potential – if successful – to bring all those countries that subscribe to the Initiative under Chinese influence.

Given its history in Afghanistan, an unpredictable President who perceives China as the US's main competitor and the desire to continue to dominate the international system in the twenty-first century in the face of new challengers and challenges, it is unlikely that Washington would remove its forces from Afghanistan.

In that sense, at least, the relationship between the two countries will continue as it has since 1921.

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Published by Future Directions International Pty Ltd.
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