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# Afghanistan: The Crossroads of Conflicting Regional Interests

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AFGHANISTAN: THE CROSSROADS OF CONFLICTING REGIONAL INTERESTS

By: Sabera Azizi

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Political Science in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York  
2019

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Afghanistan: The Crossroads of Conflicting Regional Interests

by  
Sabera Azizi

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Political Science in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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## **Abstract**

### Afghanistan: The Crossroads of Conflicting Regional Interests

By

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Despite 45 years of conflict, violence still thrives unwaveringly in Afghanistan. In a war charged with ambitious domestic actors and destructive regional states, peace is nowhere in sight in Afghanistan. The interaction between the actors of a conflict play a significant role in shaping the course of a war. Likewise, the interaction between the Taliban and Afghanistan's regional states play an important role in intensifying the war. How are regional actors emboldening the Taliban? What roles do hostile regional states play in the Afghan war? This paper answers these questions by unprecedentedly identifying and examining all of the regional states that have been playing a destructive role in the war in Afghanistan.

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## Introduction

Muhammad Iqbal, a renowned Pakistani poet, referred to Asia as “A body of water and clay, of which the Afghan nation forms the heart.”<sup>1</sup> Historians too refer to Afghanistan as the heart of Asia due to its location. Although its location is glorified in literature, in reality, Afghanistan’s location has been a curse to its stability. As a small country nearly the size of Texas, Afghanistan has six neighbors. It’s strategic location near India, China, Russia, and Iran, has turned it into a battleground for regional conflicts and power competitions.

The war in Afghanistan is a very complex and multifaceted intrastate war. There are various domestic and external factors that have contributed to the ongoing 45-years conflict. Mainly, there are two factors that has inhibited peace in Afghanistan. Firstly, the zero-sum game between Afghanistan’s ruling elites have intensified the conflict. Secondly, the negative intervention by regional states have been prolonging the war.

Due to the complex multi-party dynamics of the war in Afghanistan, there are many ambiguities and misconceptions within political conversations that cloud the reality in Afghanistan. The objective of this paper is to shed light on the Afghan war. This paper seeks to identify and explain the destabilizing roles that regional actors play in the war by utilizing academic research and empirical evidence.

This paper is an important contribution to the political conversations on the war in Afghanistan because it’s a one-of-a-kind analysis that examines the destabilizing roles of the main regional players collectively. For academics, this paper enriches the academic literature on the

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<sup>1</sup> Muhammad Iqbal, *A message from the East: A translation of Iqbal's Payam-i Mashriq into English verse*, (Lahore, Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 1977).

intervention of external states in intrastate conflicts. For political analysts and policy makers, this paper will pave the path to shift the discourse on the war in Afghanistan closer to the realities on the ground.

Furthermore, this paper begins with a general overview of the academic literature on the roles of external states in intrastate conflicts. Then, this paper provides an overview of Afghanistan's ongoing 45-years of conflict, leading to an analysis of the destabilizing roles that regional players have on current conflict. Using academic theories discussed in the earlier part of the paper, along with empirical evidences, this paper will identify and explain the destabilizing roles that regional players have been exerting in the Afghan war. Finally, this paper will conclude by providing recommendations to policy makers on effective ways to gear towards a path of stability and peace in Afghanistan.

## **The Debate**

The earlier academic literature on intrastate conflicts defined civil wars as a two-party conflict between a government and a rebel group. However, David Cunningham accurately notes that, "Intrastate conflicts are not always a 'two-actor-phenomena,' such approach would limit our ability to understand the dynamics of a conflict."<sup>2</sup> The tendency to simplify the nature of intrastate conflicts fail to capture the nuances of most contemporary civil wars because extrinsic factors greatly impact the dynamics of intrastate conflicts.

One of the significant extrinsic factors that effect an intrastate conflict is the support that external states give to the main actors of an intrastate conflict. Academic research has

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<sup>2</sup> David E. Cunningham, "Veto Players and Civil War Duration", (Bloomington, Midwest Political Science Association, 2006) 891.



demonstrated that external actors intervene in an intrastate conflict to either end a conflict or to exacerbate it by providing support to a main actor of the conflict.<sup>3</sup> In that regards, civil wars are complex intrastate conflicts in which the main actors tend to be a government and a rebel group, but external actors play a key role in effecting the severity, duration, and outcome of the war. However, the roles of external actors in conflicts are not monolithic. The degree of impact that external actors have on a conflict is dependent upon the interests of the external actors that are at stake and the extent of influence that the external actors have on the main actors of an intrastate conflict.

External states intervene in an intrastate conflict for several reasons. Foremost, external states intervene in an intrastate conflict when its interests can be attained by exacerbating a conflict. Another academic research suggest that states intervene on the basis of humanitarian grounds to protect mass atrocities against civilians.<sup>4</sup> Further academic research indicates that neighboring regional states intervene in a civil war to prevent the conflict from spilling over to the borders of the neighboring states and to safeguard the stability of an entire region.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, the overall academic literature confirms Balch-Lindsay and Enterline's observation that, "Whether on the grounds of benevolent or malevolent reasons", an external state's intervention in a civil war is always strategic.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Dylan Balch-Lindsay and Andrew J. Enterline, "Killing Time: The World Politics of Civil War Duration, 1820-1992" (Hoboken, Wiley, 2000). Ibrahim Elbadawi and Nicholas Sambanis, "Why Are There So Many Civil Wars in Africa? Understanding and Preventing Violent Conflict" (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000). Patrick M. Regan, "Third Party Interventions and the Duration of Intrastate Conflicts" (Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> J. L. Holzgrefe and Robert Keohane, "Humanitarian Intervention: Ethical, Legal and Political Dilemmas", (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Jacob Kathman, "Civil War Diffusion and Regional Motivations for Intervention", (Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Balch-Lindsay and Enterline, "Killing Time"

Furthermore, the support of external states is critical to the survivability of weak domestic actors. In particular, the support of external states to relatively weak domestic actors or to the main actors of a conflict that lack popular support play a significant role in fueling a conflict. If an insurgency lacks popular support, the assistance of an external state is crucial for the insurgent to sustain its insurgency. External states that support domestic rebel groups do so because it's cost-efficient. Idean Salehyan's research indicates that external states support domestic rebel groups at the cost of weakening its rival government because its less costly than directing engaging with its rival.<sup>7</sup>

In intrastate conflicts, external states tend to be veto players or third-party actors. According to Cunningham, there are three characteristics that make an actor a veto player.<sup>8</sup> Foremost, veto players are actors that have the ability to unilaterally run a war. Secondly, the interests of a veto player conflicts with the interests of at least one of the main actors in a conflict. Lastly, veto players are internally strong and cohesive to effectively maintain its position throughout a conflict. In intrastate conflicts, external veto players tend to have pervasive authority over one of the main domestic actors. If an external veto player is present in a civil war, it is likely that one of the main domestic actors of the conflict is entirely dependent on the veto player to continue the war.

Moreover, third-party actors are players that are not the main actors of a conflict but indirectly play an important role in shaping the course of a conflict. Although third-party actors are not directly involved in the warfare, their role is significant as "Actions and support from third parties can strongly influence the relative strength and expectations of the main conflict

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<sup>7</sup> Idean Salehyan, "The Delegation of War to Rebel Organizations", (Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> David E. Cunningham, "Veto Players and Civil War Duration", (Bloomington, Midwest Political Science Association, 2006).

protagonists, and often shape the outcome of conflict process.”<sup>9</sup> A third party actor utilizes the momentum of a conflict as a means to further its interests. Unlike veto players, third-party actors do not have the means to unilaterally continue a conflict. However, third-party actors have the capability of escalating a conflict by supporting a main actor within in a conflict. Dylan Balch-Lindsay’s and Andrew J. Enterline’s research proves that, “Third-parties are critical to the evolution of civil wars because they offer domestic opponents engaged in the conflict the opportunity to garner new resources, thereby altering the probability of victory for each of the sides.”<sup>10</sup>

In light of the literature on intrastate conflicts, this paper hypothesizes that the support that regional states give to the Taliban exacerbates and lengthens the current conflict in Afghanistan. The support that regional countries give to the Taliban is critical to the Taliban’s insurgency. As the Taliban lacks popular support, the Taliban is reliant on the sponsorship of regional states to continue the war. This paper applies the theories on external state intervention to the conflict in Afghanistan by examining the role of five regional states as case studies.

### **Afghanistan’s Conflicts**

War has been plaguing Afghan society for nearly forty-five years. The current phase of the conflict in Afghanistan is a continuation of a series of conflicts initiated in 1973.

Since 1973, the war in Afghanistan can be divided into six phases:

Phase 1 → Mohammad Daud’s Regime (1973-1978)

Phase 2 → Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan (1979-1989)

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<sup>9</sup> Kristian Skrede Gleditsch and Kyle Beardsley, “Nosy Neighbors: Third-Party Actors in Central American Conflicts”, (Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications, 2004) 379.

<sup>10</sup> Balch-Lindsay and Enterline, *Killing Time*, 624.

Phase 3 → Post-Soviet Withdrawal ( 1989-1992)

Phase 4 → Mujdahideen Conflict ( 1992-1996)

Phase 5 → Taliban Movement ( 1996-2001)

Phase 6 → Second Taliban Movement (2001- Present)

In each phase of the conflict, Afghan actors were supported by various foreign powers. Yet, the two constant factors that has prompted the participation of regional powers in the Afghan wars are Afghanistan's strategic location and its natural resources.

### **Phase 1: Mohammad Daud's Regime (1973-1978)**

In 1973, as Mohammad Zahir Shah, Afghanistan's king, was in Europe for medical treatment, Mohammad Daud, his cousin, overthrew the Afghan monarchy and established the Republic of Afghanistan.<sup>11</sup> With the help of communist Afghan military officials, Daud successfully carried out a bloodless coup and declared himself the first president of the republic.<sup>12</sup> As a reward to the communists that supported his coup, Daud appointed them in key positions within his newly formed government.

However, Daud's newly established government was met with backlash by Islamists who opposed the overwhelming influence of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), Afghan communist party, within his government.<sup>13</sup> Islamists, notably Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Ahmad Shah Massoud, fled to neighboring Pakistan and were militarily trained under Zulfikar Ali

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<sup>11</sup> J. Bruce Amstutz, *Afghanistan: The First Five Years of Soviet Occupation*, (Honolulu, University Press of the Pacific, 2002). 102-104

<sup>12</sup> Kevin Baker, *War in Afghanistan: A Short History of Eighty Wars and Conflicts in Afghanistan and the North-West Frontier 1839-201*, (Kenthurst, Rosenberg Publishing, 2011) 156-160.

<sup>13</sup> Anthony Arnold, *Afghanistan's Two-Party Communism: Parcham and Khalq*, (Stanford, Hoover Institution Press, 1983) 1-51.

Bhutto's watch.<sup>14</sup> For Pakistan, these Islamists were trained to carry out small-sized attacks to deter Daud from pursuing a tough foreign policy against Pakistan.<sup>15</sup> However, for the Afghan Islamists, the attacks were aimed to trigger a nation-wide revolution against Daud's regime in an attempt to establish an Islamic government.

### **Phase 2: Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan (1979-1989)**

In 1978, with the help of the Soviet Union, members of the PDPA overthrew Daud's regime and Nur Mohammad Taraki, a member of the PDPA, was installed as the president of Afghanistan.<sup>16</sup> Nearly a year later, the bitterness of the Islamists continued to build-up against the government in Kabul when Hafizullah Amin, Taraki's successor and a member of the PDPA, came to power.<sup>17</sup>

On December 25, 1979, as the Soviet Union crossed the Amu Darya into Afghanistan, Afghan Islamists continued to flee to Pakistan. Two days later, on the occasion of Babrak Karmal's installation as the next president of Afghanistan, thousands of anti-government figures fled to Pakistan.

In Pakistan, the Islamist received training. These Islamists formed the Mujahideen, a group dedicated to fighting against the Soviet incursion of Afghanistan and the Soviet-installed government in Kabul. The Mujahideen was heavily armed and well-financed by the United States

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<sup>14</sup> Bruce Riedel, *What We Won: America's Secret War in Afghanistan, 1979-89*, (Washington D.C., Brookings Institution Press, 2014)45-47.

<sup>15</sup> Elisabeth Leake, *The Defiant Border: The Afghan-Pakistan Borderlands in the Era of Decolonization, 1936-1965*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2016) 247-249.

<sup>16</sup> Gregory Feifer, *The Great Gamble: The Soviet War in Afghanistan*, ( New York City, Harper Perennial)1-86.

<sup>17</sup> Arnold, *Afghanistan's Two-Party Communism*, 79-98.

and Saudi Arabia.<sup>18</sup> As a result of the Mujahideen's long-fought campaign against the Soviet Union and the PDPA, the Soviets withdrew in 1989.<sup>19</sup>

### **Phase 3: Post-Soviet Withdrawal (1989-1992)**

Ten years of intrastate conflict between the Mujahideen and the PDPA dwindled when the Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan. However, a relatively less-intense conflict ensued between the PDPA and the Mujahideen as Mohammad Najibullah, a Soviet-backed president, was in power.<sup>20</sup>

As the Kremlin's funding for Najibullah's regime decreased, Najibullah's government weakened. As a result, members of Najibullah's government shifted their allegiance to different factions of the Mujahideen. Subsequently, the tension between the Mujahideen factions intensified as former communist-foes entered the ranks of the Mujahideen.

By 1992, Najibullah's regime collapsed and various factions of the Mujahideen made significant inroads into Afghanistan, each controlling large chunks of Afghanistan's territory. As each faction of the Mujahideen believed that their respective faction deserved the presidency, the political climate was ripe for another phase of intense intrastate fighting.

### **Phase 4: Mujahideen Conflict (1992-1996)**

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<sup>18</sup> Feifer, *The Great Gamble*, 120-151.

<sup>19</sup> Feifer, *The Great Gamble*, 218-255.

<sup>20</sup> Tomsen, *The Wars of Afghanistan*, 3-14.

Although an interim government was established by consensus amongst the leaders of the Mujahideen, most of them failed to abide by the agreement. On April 25, 1992, intense fighting broke out between the Mujahideen factions as Hizb-e-Islami Hekmatyar, a Mujdahideen faction, entered Kabul with forty tanks.<sup>21</sup> The factions were backed by regional powers, seeking their geopolitical interests in Afghanistan via the Mujahideen factions.

In the subsequent four years, conflict between the factions intensified, displacing over half a million civilians.<sup>22</sup> According to Ahmed Rashid, a journalist and an expert on Afghanistan, the Mujahideen's infighting left Afghanistan in a "State of virtual disintegration... the country was divided into warlord fiefdoms and all the warlords had fought, switched sides, and fought again in a bewildering array of alliances, betrayals, and bloodsheds."<sup>23</sup> As a result, the local Afghan population became disenchanted with the Mujahideen. In 1996, as the Taliban made significant inroads into Afghanistan promising peace and stability, Afghans welcomed the Taliban leadership.

### **Phase 5: Taliban Movement (1996-2001)**

On December 25, 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. During the ten years of Soviet occupation, the Soviets carried out indiscriminate attacks, carpet-bombing heavily populated districts in an attempt to suppress the population from rebelling against the government in Kabul.<sup>24</sup> The Soviet war in Afghanistan resulted in 1.5 million civilian deaths and

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 483-517.

<sup>22</sup> "Blood-Stained Hands Past Atrocities in Kabul and Afghanistan's Legacy of Impunity" (United States of America, Human Rights Watch, 2005)

<sup>23</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central*, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2010) 21.

<sup>24</sup> J. Bruce Amstutz, *Afghanistan: The First Five Years of Soviet Occupation* (Washington, DC: National Defense University, 1986), 143-151.

approximately five million Afghans fled to neighboring countries. Of these five million Afghans, three million fled to Pakistan to escape the horrific effects of the war.<sup>25</sup>

In the refugee camps in Pakistan, Afghan boys, mostly orphans, studied in Saudi-sponsored madrassas. According to Peter Tomsen, former special U.S. Envoy to Afghanistan, the teachers of these students “Were clerics from radical Muslim parties in Pakistan.”<sup>26</sup> These madrassas weren’t built for scholarship rather, it was designed to advance the political agenda of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.<sup>27</sup> In these madrassas, students learned political values that were sympathetic to Wahabbism and Deobandism. Furthermore, according to a U.S. intelligence information report, “The mullahs convince these young boys at the madrasas to go to war and fight this holy jihad [in the 1990s].”<sup>28</sup> The madrassas built the Taliban’s political and theological foundation and the students in these madrassas constituted the first wave of Taliban fighters entering Afghanistan from Pakistan.

Militarily, members of the Taliban received 15-29 days of training in Kandahar and Herat (strategic provinces in Afghanistan). The Taliban were supported by the Frontier Corps, a branch of Pakistan’s military, and the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Pakistan’s intelligence agency. The Frontier-Corps were heavily involved in the Taliban’s combat operations. According to a U.S. intelligence information report, “These frontier corps elements [were] utilized in command and control; training; and when necessary combat.”<sup>29</sup>

On November 4, 1994, the Taliban made its first inroad into Afghanistan via Kandahar. A day later, the Taliban swiftly gained control over Kandahar due to the anarchic environment in the

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<sup>25</sup> Marek Sliwinski, “Geneva researcher documents. Soviet genocide in Afghanistan”, (Leesburg, Executive Intelligence Review, 1988)

<sup>26</sup> Peter Tomsen, "PBS Frontline Interview: Taliban," 2006.

<sup>27</sup> Rashid, Taliban, 88-90.

<sup>28</sup> *Pakistan: "The Taliban's Godfather,"* National Security Archive, 2007.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*



province. According to Rashid, the security in Kandahar was such that “International aid agencies were fearful of even working in Kandahar as the city itself was divided by warring groups...warlords seized homes and farms, threw out their occupants and handed them over to their supporters. The commanders abused the population at will, kidnapping young girls and boys for sexual pleasure, robbing merchants in the bazaars and fighting and brawling in the streets.”<sup>30</sup> Such anarchy in Kandahar led the local Afghan population to initially embrace the Taliban’s movement and its reign over Kandahar. The Taliban’s stable rule over Kandahar enabled it to expand its influence to neighboring provinces by promising to bring peace and stability to the other war-ridden provinces.

Nearly three weeks after the Taliban controlled Kandahar, on November 25, 1994, the Taliban advanced eastwards and seized Helmand. Three months later, the Taliban made further gains by controlling Wardak and Logar. By the end of 1995, the Taliban controlled significant parts of Afghanistan’s southern and western provinces.

The following year, on April 4, 1996, the Taliban declared jihad against the Mujahideen government in Kabul. A month later, on May 1996, Osama Bin Laden settled in Jalalabad, Afghanistan.<sup>31</sup> The Taliban enabled bin Laden and Al Qaeda to use Afghanistan as a base for their operations. On September 26, 1996, the Taliban captured Kabul. As the Mujahideen’s government crumbled, the United Islamic Front for Salvation of Afghanistan (UIFSA) became the main domestic force that resisted the Taliban’s incursion of Afghanistan.<sup>32</sup>

For the next five years, from 1996-2001, heavy fighting ensued between the Taliban and the UIFSA. The conflict between these two groups created an “Unprecedented polarization in the

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<sup>30</sup> Rashid, *Taliban*, 21.

<sup>31</sup> *Timeline*: “Osama bin Laden, over the years”, CNN, 2011.

region.”<sup>33</sup> The region was starkly divided between pro-Taliban states and anti-Taliban states. The Taliban was backed by Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, whereas the UIFSA was backed by Iran, Russia, Turkey, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan.

By 2001, the Taliban controlled nearly 90% of Afghanistan. However, on that year, Afghanistan’s political landscape changed significantly. On September 11, Al Qaeda carried out attacks against the United States. Subsequently, the Bush administration requested the Taliban to surrender Bin Laden to the international community. However, the Taliban refused to hand over bin Laden. The Taliban’s refusal led Washington to assist the UIFSA to topple the Taliban’s regime.

On October 7, 2001, the U.S.-led coalition began Operation Enduring Freedom by carrying out airstrikes against the Taliban and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. As American airstrikes intensified, the Taliban and Al Qaeda fled to neighboring Pakistan. Tomsen notes that “The Taliban leadership returned to their old sanctuaries in Pakistan. Bin Laden crossed into Pakistan with his wives, children, and long lines of armed al-Qaeda fighters disappeared from view.”<sup>34</sup> In 2002, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, leader of Hizb-I-Islami Hekmatyar, declared a holy war against the United States and fled to Pakistan from Iran.

On November 25<sup>th</sup>, 2001, the Taliban’s reign over Afghanistan came to an end as the UIFSA gained control over Kunduz, the Taliban’s last stronghold. Nearly a month after the fall of Kunduz, on December 22, Hamid Karzai was sworn in as the chairman of the Afghan interim government.

### **Phase 6: Second Taliban Movement (2001- Present)**

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<sup>33</sup>Rashid, *Taliban*, 5.

<sup>34</sup>Tomsen, *Wars of Afghanistan*, 592.

Subsequent to the end of the Taliban's regime, the International community backed Hamid Karzai as the head of the new interim government. As Afghanistan started to reconstruct its society, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) assisted the Afghan government in maintaining security and rebuilding its security institutions.

After Karzai led the interim government for nearly three years, on November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2004, he was elected as the first president of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. Nearly a month later, on December 7, 2004, Karzai was sworn into office. In his inaugural address, Karzai expressed his commitment to transform a war-ridden Afghanistan to a prosperous Afghanistan. Many Afghans and members of the international community were optimistic that a peaceful Afghanistan would soon come to be. Merajuddin Patan, the governor of Khost province, told the *Washington Post* that, "This is the birth of our nation... I believe the real history of Afghanistan – modern history – will begin with this." Similarly, on Karzai's inauguration day, Richard Bruce Cheney, former U.S. vice-president, said at a news conference that, "We gather to mark a historic moment in the life of the nation and in the history of human freedom." Cheney concluded that "The tyranny is gone, the terrorist enemy is scattered and the people of Afghanistan are free."<sup>35</sup> However, the optimism that aroused from Karzai's inauguration was short-lived because the Taliban's insurgency started to gain momentum.

On the same year of Karzai's inauguration as president, the Taliban started using suicide attacks regularly against the Afghan government and the international-coalition forces. A year later, in 2005, Hekmatyar, started taking responsibility "For bombings, ambushes, and assassinations in Konar, Nuristan, Baghlan, and Kunduz provinces of Afghanistan."<sup>36</sup> The

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<sup>35</sup> John Lancaster, "At Inauguration, Karzai Vows Action On Tough Issues", (*Washington D.C. Washington Post*, 2004.

<sup>36</sup> Tomsen, *Wars of Afghanistan*, 592-597.

resurgence in violence was due to Pakistan's support for the Taliban. Tomsen indicates that, "From about early 2002 into 2003, the ISI organized three fronts to conduct offensive operations into Afghanistan from protected sanctuaries in Pakistan."<sup>37</sup> With Pakistan's guidance and expertise, the Taliban carried out its operations in Afghanistan.

On September 29, 2016, Hekmatyar signed a peace deal with Kabul, vowing to abandon his insurgency and embrace peace. Hekmatyar's renouncement of violence marked a milestone in the current 17-years conflict as he was first insurgent leader to reconcile with the Afghan government. At that time, most political analysts were optimistic that the Taliban would follow Hekmatyar's steps and make peace with Kabul too. However, Hekmatyar's reconciliation with Kabul didn't trigger the desired domino-effect that would have induced other insurgent groups to embrace peace. Rather, the Taliban continued its insurgency.

Till date, the Taliban continues to carry out deadly attacks, causing significant surges in civilian casualties. Despite the resilient efforts of Kabul and the international community, the Taliban are still strong. Today, the Taliban threatens nearly 70% of Afghanistan's territory, the most since the fall of its regime.

## **The Actors in Current Phase of the Afghan War**

### **Defining the current war**

The current conflict in Afghanistan is mainly an intrastate conflict. Intrastate conflicts are armed conflicts that are fought within the borders of a sovereign state and typically involve the "Active participation of the national government and effective resistance by both sides."<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*,593.

<sup>38</sup> Melvin Small and Joe Stinger, *Resort to Arms: International and Civil Wars, 1816-1980*, (Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications,1982) 210.

Likewise, in the current war, Afghanistan is the battleground where the main actors are Afghans that are backed by foreign powers.<sup>39</sup>

### Identifying the Main Actors

Specifically, the main actors of the current phase of the conflict are the Taliban along with the pro-Taliban forces against the Anti-Taliban forces:

Main anti-government actors	Main pro-government actors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taliban</li> <li>• Groups that assist the Taliban:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Drug traffickers</li> <li>➤ Regional sponsors of the Taliban</li> <li>➤ Warlords</li> <li>➤ Rogue elements within the Afghan government</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Afghan government</li> <li>• International Community</li> </ul>

As the chart above depicts, the main-anti government forces are the Taliban and the pro-Taliban forces. The Taliban are regularly assisted by local drug traffickers and warlords to carry out their operations.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, rogue elements within the Afghan government are complicit in abetting the Taliban carry out deadly attacks against civilians and political opponents. Ghulam Hussain Nasir, a member of the Afghan parliament said, “Suicide bombers are being transferred

<sup>39</sup> Anisa Shaheed, Sayyaf Urges Crackdown On ‘Agents Within The System,’ (Kabul, Tolo News, 2017).

<sup>40</sup> Ben Farmer, “Afghan drug lord who funded Taliban faces jail” (London, the Telegraph, 2012).

with the help of circles within the government which is a serious concern.”<sup>41</sup> These rogue elements assist the Taliban to bypass security checkpoints inside Afghanistan, transport the Taliban’s weapons, and leak sensitive information to the Taliban. In Afghanistan, the local population refer to these rogue elements inside the government as the “Taliban that wear suits” and the “fifth pillar.” Furthermore, there are elements within the Afghan government that receive bribes to assist the Taliban to carry out attacks against the Afghan government.<sup>42</sup> The Taliban bribes political officials to obtain governmental resources such as vehicles, gas and, weapons.<sup>43</sup> At other instances, security officials receive bribes from the Taliban to leave their posts, thereby increasing insecurity.<sup>44</sup> Such rogue elements have also been accused of releasing anti-government actors from jail.<sup>45</sup> These rogue elements within the Afghan government that assist the Taliban continue to play a key role in enabling the Taliban to carry out large-scale attacks.

Furthermore, the regional countries that assist and strengthen the Taliban’s ability to carry out attacks play a significant factor in lengthening the intrastate conflict in Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, the Taliban are supported by Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Russia, and China. Although these regional countries maintain official ties with the government in Kabul, these regional states also maintain covert ties with the Taliban. These regional countries use covert and official channels as a means to effectively advance their respective national interests. However, these regional countries are listed under “main anti-government actors” that assist the Taliban because their support to the Taliban plays a larger role in the conflict than their official relationships with Kabul.

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<sup>41</sup> “Gov’t Circles Facilitating Insurgent Attacks: MPs” (Kabul, Ariana News, 2018).

<sup>42</sup> “EU Voices Concern over Sell of Security Forces Weapons to Taliban” (Kabul, Ariana News, 2017).

<sup>43</sup> “Farakhabar: Alleged Presence of Fifth Pillar in Security Agencies Discussed” (Kabul, Tolo News, 2016).

<sup>44</sup> “Local Security Officials will be Tried for Leaving Stations to Taliban: Kamawal,” (Kabul, Ariana News, 2016).

<sup>45</sup> “Qadir: Daesh commanders in Kabul, commuting in security institutions,” (Kabul, Ariana News, 2015).

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)'s alleged branch in the Afghan-Pakistan area is known as the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) or Daesh's Khorasan province. ISKP first entered the battle-scene in Afghanistan in 2014, raising their flags in Nangarhar province. However, this paper doesn't consider ISKP as a main anti-government actor in the current phase of the Afghan war.

Foremost, ISKP isn't a significant force threatening the stability and territorial integrity of Afghanistan. According to a report published by the Middle East Institute, "The Islamic State has so far failed to recreate its success in Syria and Iraq and establish a stronghold in Afghanistan."<sup>46</sup> ISKP is a relatively weak actor than the Taliban. According to last year's United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA) report on civilian casualties, the Taliban remains the main actor that inflicts the majority of the casualties in the Afghan war. The report indicated that the Taliban was responsible for 65% of the civilian casualties in the war whereas 15% of civilian casualties was inflicted by ISKP. Also, the report indicated that the casualties attributed to the Taliban is under-reported due to the lack of access to Taliban-controlled areas to gather accurate information.<sup>47</sup> In reality, the Taliban is responsible for more than 65% of the civilian casualties.

Furthermore, although, ISKP operates under the banner of ISIS, there is no proven connection between ISKP and the group in Syria and Iraq. TRT, a Turkish-based news agency, reported that there "Is no 'hard evidence' to show operational links between the members in Afghanistan and Baghdadi's group in the Middle East."<sup>48</sup> Rather, Afghan officials have concluded

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<sup>46</sup>Lauran McNally, Alex Amiral, Marvin Weinbaum, and Antoun Issa, "The Islamic State in Afghanistan: Examining its Threat to Stability," (Washington D.C., Middle East Institute, 2016).

<sup>47</sup>"Afghanistan Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict Annual Report 2017" (Kabul, United Nations Mission Assistance in Afghanistan and United Nations Human Rights Council Office of the High Commissioner, 2018).

<sup>48</sup> "Is Deash A Reality in Afghanistan?" (Istanbul, TRT World, 2016).

that ISKP is the Taliban operating under a different flag. According to Faqir Mohammad Jowzjani, the police chief of Jowzjan province, “Taliban are now operating under the name of Daesh by raising their flags.”<sup>49</sup> Similarly, Tolo News, an Afghan news agency, reported that the Afghan Ministry of Defense (MoD) concluded that the large-scale attacks are carried out by Haqqani network (a subgroup of the Quetta Shura led by Sirajuddin Haqqani, the deputy of the Quetta Shura) under the name of Daesh.<sup>50</sup> Essentially, it is the Taliban raising ISIS’ flag in Afghanistan.

Analysts believe that the Taliban’s attempt to operate under the ISIS flag is due to the Taliban’s desire to rebrand itself as a relatively moderate group than ISKP to the local Afghan population. Moreover, Borhan Osman, an analyst at Afghanistan Analyst Network, noted that the members of the Taliban dissatisfied with the larger Taliban movement use the banner of ISKP to “To settle scores with their ex-comrades.”<sup>51</sup> The Haqqani network administers the attacks of the Taliban and ISKP. However, the combat between the Taliban and ISKP is between the members of the main Taliban group and the Taliban that are disenchanted with elements of the main group. Therefore, in this paper, ISKP isn’t considered a main-actor in the current phase of the Afghan war because the Afghan government concluded that ISKP in Afghanistan is just the Taliban operating under a different color of flag.

Moreover, the main actors that are combatting against the Taliban are the Afghan government and the international community. In the Afghan government, the main forces that are combatting the Taliban forces are the Afghan National Army (ANA), the Afghan National Police (ANP), and Afghan political figures that are in favor of the regime in Kabul. Furthermore, from the international community, NATO and the United States are the main actors that are supporting

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<sup>49</sup> “Taliban Militants Raise Daesh Flags in Jowzjan: Officials” ( Kabul, Tolo News, 2016).

<sup>50</sup> Syed Zabiullah Langari, “The Rise And Fall Of Daesh’s Caliphate” ( Kabul, Tolo News, 2018).

<sup>51</sup> “Is Deash A Reality in Afghanistan?” ( Istanbul, TRT World, 2016).



the Afghan government to combat the Taliban. Since 2001, NATO has been assisting the Afghan government to strengthen its security institutions and its counter-terrorism capabilities. Similarly, since 2001, the United States is aiding the Afghan government to strengthen its capabilities to counter the Taliban. Washington is the main donor providing the Afghan government the resources it requires to combat the Taliban.

Although there are many actors involved in the current war in Afghanistan, this paper only examines the destabilizing role that the main regional states have in the conflict. Since the Taliban is the main-anti government force, this paper will identify and explain the destabilizing role that regional actors play in the war vis-à-vis the relations of the regional players with the Taliban.

### **Defining the Taliban**

In October 2001, the Taliban's regime crumbled as the United States assisted the UIFSA to overthrow the Taliban's government. Within the span of two months, the Taliban's political and military power reduced significantly. As the Taliban's regime dwindled, hundreds of fighters escape to Pakistan. In Pakistan, the ISI assisted the Taliban to rebuild its militaristic capabilities. However, the Taliban lacked the political legitimacy it once enjoyed in 1994 when they marched into Afghanistan as the Mujahideen were consumed by their own internal rivalries. To fill this void of political legitimacy, the Taliban became more flexible in accommodating the interests of regional powers to induce greater regional support for its insurgency.

In the years after 2001, in the second phase of the Taliban's insurgency, the Taliban lacks popular support. In a survey published by Langer Research Associates, only 4% of Afghans

support the Taliban, whereas 92% of Afghans support the democratic government in Kabul.<sup>52</sup> Unlike other insurgent groups that rely on popular support to maintain the insurgency, the Taliban relies on regional states to sustain its insurgency.

Considering the dynamics of the Taliban's insurgency, this paper defines the Taliban as a conglomerate group of militia proxies that serve the interests of regional powers. With the assistance of regional sponsors and rogue elements within Kabul, the Taliban carries out its operations inside Afghanistan.

The Taliban's fighters are local Afghans who join the Taliban to avenge the Afghan government due to grievances, foreign fighters from regional countries, and students from madrassas in Pakistan. However, the majority of the Taliban's fighters still come from the madrassas in Pakistan. Specifically, these fighters mostly come from madrassas led by Jamiat-i-Ulama-i-Islam-Fazlur (JUI-F) and Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam-Sami (JUI-S). The JUI-F is led by Maulana Fazlur Rahman, a Pakistani politician who endorses the Taliban's war in Afghanistan. The JUI-S is led by Sami ul Haq, a Pakistani politician, known as the Father of the Taliban, who mainly leads the Darul Uloom Haqqania. Haq's seminary, Darul Uloom Haqqania, is commonly known as "University of Jihad" as nearly 80% of students from his madrassa sympathize with the Taliban or join the ranks of the Taliban.<sup>53</sup>

### **The Structure of the Taliban**

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<sup>52</sup> "Afghan Futures: A National Public Opinion Survey" ( New York City, Langer Research Associates, 2015).

<sup>53</sup> Tim Craig, "Pakistan's 'University of Jihad' is Getting Millions of dollars from the government," ( Washington D.C., Washington Post, 2016).

Today, the Taliban is a loosely-collected proxy group comprised of four factions. The group has nearly 200,000 members. According to a report published by Landinfo, a Norwegian organization dedicated to collecting and analyzing data in various countries, “The [Taliban’s] mobile units are mostly based in Pakistan and Iran and deploy to Afghanistan during the fighting season, in part for logistical reasons and also because many fighters have family in those countries”

The main faction of the Taliban is the Quetta Shura headed by Mullah Haibatullah Akunzada. The three splinter groups are the Rasool Shura, Mashad Shura, and the Shura of the North.<sup>54</sup> Theoretically, the Quetta Shura is mainly active in the southern and north-western provinces of Afghanistan, the Shura of North is active in the north-eastern provinces, the Mashad Shura operates in the western provinces, and the Rasool Shura is mainly active in the western and southern provinces of Afghanistan.<sup>55</sup> However, in reality, the Taliban is active in nearly all parts of Afghanistan.

Furthermore, despite the presence of multiple factions within the Taliban, this paper will refer to the Taliban as an umbrella-term that encompasses all of the four factions. This paper takes this approach due to the nature of the group. Often, the attacks carried out by the Taliban in Afghanistan are claimed by the group as a whole rather than by the individual factions.

## **Pakistan**

### **History of Afghanistan-Pakistan Relations**

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<sup>54</sup> Shahab ud Din Ahmad, “Afghanistan on the brink: Can the Taliban negotiate with Kabul?,” (Karachi, The Herald, 2018).

<sup>55</sup> Antonio Giustozzi, “Taliban and Islamic State: Enemies or Brothers in Jihad?” (Washington D.C., Center for Research & Policy Analysis, 2017).

On August 14, 1947, the modern state of Pakistan was established. However, Afghanistan never recognized Pakistan due to Kabul's rejection of Pakistan's internationally-recognized borders. From the start, Afghanistan's relationship with Pakistan soured as Afghanistan was the only country that opposed Pakistan's membership to the United Nations in 1947.

Since the birth of Pakistan, the Durand line has been a source of tension between Afghanistan and Pakistan.<sup>56</sup> The Durand Line is the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan that was created during the British's reign over the Indian subcontinent. Due to the border dispute, in the subsequent years following the birth of the modern Pakistani state, the monarchy in Kabul supported Pakistani-Pashtun nationalists and encouraged them to carry out malign activities in Pakistan's border, further souring Kabul's ties with Islamabad.<sup>57</sup>

On September 6, 1961, relations between Kabul and Islamabad reached its lowest. Afghanistan severed its diplomatic ties with Pakistan following Islamabad's request to Kabul to close its trade agencies and consulates in Pakistan's western provinces. Pakistan stated that the Afghan government's subversive activities in Pakistan was the reason for the closure of the consulates and trade agencies. Kabul responded by closing its border with Pakistan. However, the lack of trade between both states caused significant economic losses on both sides. As a result of these losses, in 1963, both countries restored their bilateral relations and pledged to respect each other's respective sovereignty.<sup>58</sup>

A year after the restoration of relations between Kabul and Islamabad, from 1964-1973, Afghanistan went through a period of significant political transformation. Afghanistan witnessed

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<sup>56</sup> Vinay Kaura, "The Durand Line: A British Legacy Plaguing Afghan-Pakistani Relations," (Washington D.C., Middle East Institute, 2017).

<sup>57</sup> Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Tara Vassefi, "The Forgotten History of Afghanistan-Pakistan Relations," (New Haven, Yale Journal, 2012).

<sup>58</sup> George Montagno, "The Pak-Afghan Détente," (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1963).

a period of rapid modernization.<sup>59</sup> Key characteristics of the modern Afghan government were the establishment of political parties, an Afghan parliament, free media, and legalized protests. The Afghan monarchy became a symbolic power as the Afghan constitution was established. Pakistan took advantage of Kabul's new liberal government by establishing assets in Kabul. Pakistan cultivated ties with the Afghan population to lure proxies and spies to work in favor of Islamabad in Afghanistan. Of these recruits, Pakistan's most prominent agent in Afghanistan was and continues to be Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.<sup>60</sup>

Shortly after the end of the modernization era in Afghanistan, Pakistan's proxy war in Afghanistan began during Mohammad Daud's presidency. In 1973, Afghanistan's liberal era came to an end as the monarchy was overthrown by Daud. Daud established the Republic of Afghanistan and declared himself as the republic's president. During Daud's reign, he frequently brought up the issue of the Durand Line, thereby angering Pakistan. At the same time, Daud faced opposition by a minority of Afghans who opposed the communists' influence in his government. These dissidents fled to Pakistan and were supported by Pakistan's ISI to carry out attacks against Daud's government. Pakistan utilized these dissidents as a tool to coerce Daud to change his policy of confronting Pakistan.

In 1978, Daud's regime was overthrown by the PDPA and Taraki succeeded as the president of Afghanistan. Taraki's regime caused the first significant wave of Afghan dissidents to flee to Pakistan. Furthermore, in the subsequent years, from 1978-1992, Afghan dissidents who opposed the succeeding Soviet-backed regimes in Afghanistan fled to Pakistan. In Pakistan, these dissidents were trained and supported by ISI to subvert the regimes in Kabul. These dissidents were known as the Mujahideen. Aid from Riyadh and Washington poured into Pakistan to support

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<sup>59</sup> Tomsen, *The Wars of Afghanistan*, 97-99.

<sup>60</sup> "Frontline Interview: Taliban" (PBS, 2006).

the Mujahideen against the Soviet-backed regimes in Kabul. As Pakistan was hosting the Afghan Mujahideen, from 1978-1992, the relationship between the official governments in Kabul and Islamabad soured.

From 1978-1989, as the Soviet backed communist regimes remained in Kabul, Pakistan channeled most of the aid from Riyadh and Washington to Hekmatyar. Hektmatyar was Pakistan's proxy in Afghanistan. Pakistan was determined to establish a cordial relationship with a Post-Soviet Afghanistan by installing its agent, Hekmatyar, in power. According to Tomsen, "Pakistani dictator Zia ul-Haq's vision for Afghanistan's future was sweeping, audacious- and unreliable...it sought to install a radical Islamist Afghan regime in Kabul led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar after the Soviet withdrawal."<sup>61</sup>

In April 1992, as Najibullah's regime collapsed, Kabul's ailing governmental institutions crumbled. Pakistan exploited the power vacuum inside Afghanistan. From 1992-2001, Pakistan played a significant role in shaping Afghanistan's domestic politics. In those nine years, Pakistan aided anti-government figures. As a result of Pakistan's overwhelming interference in Afghanistan's politics, the regime in Kabul never recovered to function as a prosperous government. Pakistan's support for rebels led to a de facto absence of a government in Kabul from 1992-2001.

On April 30, 1992, a weak interim government was established in Kabul led by Sibghatullah Mujadeddi.<sup>62</sup> Despite the establishment of the government in Kabul, the ISI supplied Hekmatyar with weapons, giving him an incentive to revolt against the interim government. As

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<sup>61</sup> Tomsen, *The Wars of Afghanistan*, 243.

<sup>62</sup> Yahia Baiza, *Education in Afghanistan: Developments, Influences and Legacies Since 1901* (Abingdon, Routledge, 2013) 163-164.

Hekmatyar revolted against Kabul, a bloody civil war ensued between the Mujahideen factions until 1996.

While the ISI was fueling the civil war in Kabul, Islamabad was simultaneously nurturing the Taliban. Pakistan had envisioned the Taliban to succeed Hekmatyar in governing the Afghan government. As Hekmatyar's attempts at seizing absolute power failed, Pakistan sought to transform Afghanistan into its client state by establishing the Taliban's regime in Kabul.

With the help of Pakistan, as Steve Coll notes, "It's impossible to understand the Taliban's military triumph in Afghanistan, culminating in their takeover of Kabul in 1996, without understanding that they were a proxy force, a client of the Pakistan army, and benefited from all of the materiel support that the Pakistan army could provide them, given its own constrained resources."<sup>63</sup> In fact, William Maley notes in his book, the "Taliban did not emerge from nowhere," it was a strategically calculated movement by Pakistan.<sup>64</sup> The Taliban's movement was consolidated during Benazir Bhuttos' second term (1993-1996). Nasrullah Babar, Pakistan's interior minister, created the Afghan Trade Development Cell in his ministry. According to Rashid, the Afghan Trade Development Cell's "Principle task was to provide logistical backing for the Taliban."<sup>65</sup> Pakistan provided the Taliban with the funds and resources it required to take Afghanistan from the Mujahideen.

Islamabad provided the Taliban access to telecommunication, weapons, food, and other supplies needed to maintain its insurgency. Bhutto's government allocated parts of its budget to pay for the expenses of the Taliban's administration and the Taliban's war efforts. Pakistan's

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<sup>63</sup> "Frontline Interview: The Taliban-Pakistan Alliance" (PBS,2006).

<sup>64</sup> William maley, *Fundamentalism Reborn?: Afghanistan and the Taliban* ( New York City, NYU Press, 1998) 14.

<sup>65</sup> Rashid, *The Wars of Afghanistan*, 184.

“Foreign ministry needed to hide this money in its own budget and that of other ministries, so that it would not appear on the 1998/9 budget record and be kept away from the prying eyes of international donors.”<sup>66</sup> Pakistan also facilitated the Taliban’s purchase of arms and ammunition from Ukraine and eastern Europe. From 1997-1998, Pakistan provided the Taliban with approximately 30 million dollars in aid.

In 1994, with Pakistan’s support, the Taliban entered Afghanistan via Kandahar and swiftly gained control over it. According to Rashid, “The fall of Kandahar was celebrated by Pakistan’s government... Babar [ Pakistan’s Interior Minister] took credit for the Taliban’s success, telling journalists privately that the Taliban were ‘our boys.’”<sup>67</sup> With Pakistan’s assistance, the Taliban were able to launch successful military campaigns, taking control of key strategic provinces.<sup>68</sup> By 2001, the Taliban controlled nearly 90% of Afghanistan’s territory.

However, the attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, led to the demise of the Taliban’s regime. The September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks led Washington to initiate a military campaign against Al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan. As the international community rallied behind the United States to overthrow the Taliban’s regime, Pakistan initially opposed the overthrowing of the Taliban’s regime.<sup>69</sup> It was only when Washington emphasized to Islamabad the importance of supporting the United States’ Operation Enduring Freedom that Pakistan portrayed its support on the international level. According to *The Guardian*, “The Bush administration threatened to bomb Pakistan ‘back to the stone age’ after the September 11 attacks if the country did not cooperate

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<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, 182.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, 29.

<sup>68</sup> “Frontline Interview: Taliban” (PBS, 2006).

<sup>69</sup> Karim Amini, “Qanooni Claims Pakistan Initially Opposed The Ousting Of Taliban,” (Kabul, Tolo News, 2018).



with America's war on Afghanistan.”<sup>70</sup> Hence, Pakistan reluctantly accepted the toppling of the Taliban’s regime in Afghanistan.

In the eve of the September 11 attacks, as Washington carried out its airstrikes against the Taliban’s regime in Afghanistan, hundreds of Taliban fighters fled to Pakistan. Pakistan superficially showed its solidarity with the United States by temporarily arresting the Taliban’s religious mentors in Pakistan.<sup>71</sup> However, covertly, according to the Brookings Institute, “The ISI was providing refuge to the entire Taliban leadership after it fled from Afghanistan. Mullah Omar was kept in an ISI safe house in Quetta, the provincial capital of Baluchistan, while his militia was lodged in Pashtunabad, a sprawling Quetta suburb.”<sup>72</sup> Not only did Pakistan shelter the Taliban but the ISI also assisted the Taliban to rebuild its insurgency. Due to the ISI’s assistance, by 2003, the Taliban’s militaristic fronts near the Pakistan-Afghanistan border were established, enabling it launch attacks inside Afghanistan. Till date, Pakistan continues to nurture the Taliban because, according to Tomsen, “The military collective ruling Pakistan considered the Taliban’s survival vital to their proxy war strategy in Afghanistan.”<sup>73</sup>

### **Pakistan’s support for the Taliban**

After the demise of the Taliban’s regime, Pakistan has maintained official ties with the subsequent governments in Kabul. Despite Islamabad’s official ties with Kabul, the ISI still sponsors the Taliban. Pakistan has significant interests in supporting the Taliban. The Taliban is

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<sup>70</sup> Suzanne Goldenberg, “Bush threatened to bomb Pakistan, says Musharraf,” (London, The Guardian, 2006).

<sup>71</sup> Tomsen, *the Wars of Afghanistan*, 593.

<sup>72</sup> William Dalrymple, “A Deadly Triangle: Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India,” (Washington D.C., The Brookings Institute, 2013).

<sup>73</sup> Tomsen, *the Wars of Afghanistan*, 592.

an asset to Islamabad because its dedicated to serving Pakistan's interests in Afghanistan and the region. ”<sup>74</sup>

Christine Fair, an expert on South Asia, labeled the Taliban as a state proxy. At the Raisina Dialogue, Fair noted that these proxies operate with the Pakistani government's support and “Are tools of statecraft.”<sup>75</sup> In fact, Pakistan's support for the Taliban is a core pillar of Pakistan's foreign policy and grand strategy.

According to a Rand Corporation report titled, “India's and Pakistan's Strategies in Afghanistan,” Pakistan has several objectives in Afghanistan.<sup>76</sup> In the *National Interest*, I noted that “Pakistan desires to block Indian influence in Afghanistan, undermine Kabul's claims on the disputed territories near the current Afghanistan-Pakistan border, maintain a strategic depth in Afghanistan, establish safe havens in Afghanistan for Pakistani-trained extremists, and to prevent Afghanistan's regional integration. All of Pakistan's objectives in Afghanistan can only be achieved through Pakistan's patronage of the Taliban.”<sup>77</sup>

Pakistan is an insecure state. Following the partition of British India and the creation of the modern Pakistani state, Islamabad has had territorial disputes with two of its neighbors, India and Afghanistan. Till date, Pakistan has a thorny relationship with both of these neighbors. As a result of these thorny relations, Pakistan views these two neighbors as a threat. However, traditionally, New Delhi and Kabul has maintained cordial relations due to their shared animosity with Islamabad. Therefore, Islamabad seeks to establish a friendly client state in Afghanistan via the Taliban.

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<sup>74</sup> Sabera Azizi, “Why the Taliban Is Winning in Pakistan,” (Washington D.C., The National Interest, 2017).

<sup>75</sup> Christine Fair, “Raisina 2017 Terror Inc —Combating State & Non State Actors,” (New Delhi, YouTube, 2017).

<sup>76</sup> Larry Hanauer and Peter Chalk, “India's and Pakistan's Strategies in Afghanistan: Implications for the United States and the Region,” (Santa Monica, RAND Corporation, 2012).

<sup>77</sup> Azizi, “Why the Taliban Is Winning in Pakistan.”

While Islamabad doesn't have the capacity to significantly influence domestic politics in India, it does have that capacity in Afghanistan. The prolonged, ongoing 45-years conflict in Afghanistan has damaged Afghanistan's state institutions and has enabled Islamabad to significantly influence Afghanistan's political landscape. In Kabul, Pakistan seeks to obstruct the establishment of a traditionally pro-Delhi, anti- Islamabad, and sovereign government in Kabul by strengthening the Taliban to exert greater influence in Afghanistan's domestic politics, thereby weakening the credibility of the official regime in Kabul. An increase in the Taliban's influence in Afghanistan's domestic politics would inevitably decrease India's influence in Afghanistan as the Indian-supported regimes in Kabul becomes weaker.

Furthermore, Pakistan supports the Taliban to prevent Afghanistan's reintegration into the region. Islamabad seeks to abet the Taliban to fuel instability in Afghanistan to further weaken Kabul's state institutions. Islamabad desires a weak Kabul to prevent the Afghan government from ever obtaining the political and militaristic capabilities it had in 1950s and 1960s to carry out subversive activities in Pakistan.<sup>78</sup> Similarly, a weak Kabul plagued by insurgency would inhibit Kabul from challenging Pakistan's internationally-recognized border across the Durand Line.

Moreover, Pakistan is keen on using Afghanistan's territory against India. Pakistan seeks to utilize the territory inside Afghanistan that is under the Taliban's influence as a strategic depth.<sup>79</sup> The ISI assists the Taliban to control large swaths of Afghanistan's territory to enable the Pakistani army's leadership to have access to a strategic depth in the scenario that war breaks out between Pakistan and India. Additionally, like in the 1990s, Islamabad seeks to utilize Afghanistan's territory as a safe haven to harbor extremists to counter India's influence in the region.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Gartenstein-Ross and Vassefi, "The Forgotten History of Afghanistan-Pakistan Relations".

<sup>79</sup> Lt Col Khalid Masood Khan, "The Strategic Depth Concept," (Lahore, The Nation, 2015).

<sup>80</sup> Hanauer and Chalk, "India's and Pakistan's Strategies in Afghanistan", 26-27.

In the long-term, Pakistan's goal is to attain regional hegemony to counter India's influence. Fair notes in her book, *Fighting to the End: the Pakistan Army's Way of War*, that "Pakistan's defense literature clearly maintains that Pakistan's army aims to resist India's position of regional dominance and its slow but steady global ascent."<sup>81</sup> The Taliban is a key actor in advancing Pakistan's grand strategy. Islamabad is utilizing the Taliban as a means to attain regional hegemony.

To achieve regional hegemony, Tomsen, notes that Pakistan seeks to "Forge a broader Islamist bloc of Pakistan, Kashmir, Afghanistan, and eventually Central Asia to balance India, Pakistan's traditional rival."<sup>82</sup> Pakistan is attempting to install a puppet regime in Afghanistan via its proxies. To that end, Pakistan is currently fueling the Taliban's war of attrition in Afghanistan. Through its war of attrition, Pakistan seeks to wear down Washington's counter-terrorism efforts and induce it to withdraw from Afghanistan by raising the costs of war. Pakistan's success in Afghanistan via the installment of the Taliban's regime would be a starting point for it to create an Islamist bloc that would counter India.

### **Pakistan's role in the current Afghan conflict (2001-Present)**

Pakistan will continue to support the Taliban as Islamabad deems it as a means to attain its national interests. Since 2001 and as long as the current phase of Afghanistan's intrastate conflict endures, Pakistan will continue to fuel the Taliban's momentum. Tomsen accurately observes that "The most acute threat to a stable, peaceful, and neutral Afghanistan will continue to come from

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<sup>81</sup> Christine Fair, *Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army's Way of War*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014) 13-34

<sup>82</sup> Peter Tomsen, "Pakistan With Friends Like These," (New York City, World Policy, 2011).

Pakistan, even though nearly all of Afghanistan's other neighbors also support their own Afghan proxies... Islamabad has been funneling more troops and military resources to save its own asset, the Taliban."<sup>83</sup> As long as Pakistan sponsors the Taliban, the current war in Afghanistan will never come to an end. This is so because Pakistan is a veto player in the current phase of the intrastate conflict in Afghanistan.

A veto player is an actor who's "Consent is required for a negotiated end to a civil war."<sup>84</sup> Academic research has proven that veto players must agree to end a war otherwise, the war will not come to an end.<sup>85</sup> A veto player can change the direction of a conflict because it has significant influence on the outcome of a conflict. Cunningham's research proves that veto players are those that have significant influence upon the main actors in the conflict. Moreover, Cunningham proves that the stronger the veto player is, the more intense the conflict will be.

Pakistan's intimate relationship with the Taliban makes Islamabad a veto player. The inception of the Taliban movement was engineered by Pakistan. In 1994, with the help of Pakistan, the Taliban first marched into Afghanistan via Kandahar. Not only did Pakistan provide the Taliban with the logistics it required to maintain its insurgency but during the Taliban's reign, according to Tomsen, the ISI "Played the major role in military matters, from organizing offenses to equipping the forces that were fighting, and even putting out public statements. ... There was a colonel in Herat and there was a major in Kandahar -- they were coaching Mullah Omar and other Taliban, who were for the most part semiliterate, on how to administer their areas and how to proceed militarily."<sup>86</sup> Militarily, Coll notes that the Taliban had "Direct on-the-ground support

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<sup>83</sup> Tomsen, *the Wars of Afghanistan*, 559.

<sup>84</sup> David E. Cunningham, "Veto Players and Civil War Duration," (Bloomington, Midwest Political Science Association, 2006) 878.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> Frontline Interview: Taliban (PBS, 2006).

from undercover Pakistani officers in civilian clothes who would participate in particular military battles” against the UIFSA. Moreover, following the 9/11 attacks, despite Pakistan’s pledge to cooperate with Washington, Pakistan continued to shelter and support the Taliban. Till date, Pakistan’s support for the Taliban fuels the Taliban’s insurgency.

Furthermore, as a veto player, Pakistan has significant influence to steer the direction of the conflict in Afghanistan. Tomsen noted in an interview with PBS that, Pakistan “Could close it [the Taliban’s training centers] down overnight.”<sup>87</sup> Given Pakistan’s overwhelming influence on the Taliban, Islamabad could bring the war to an end. However, given Pakistan’s perceived interests in supporting the Taliban, Islamabad chooses to prolong the war.

Like any veto player, Pakistan has the ability to unilaterally continue the Taliban’s insurgency. Cunningham notes in his study that, “To be a veto player a group must have the ability to continue the war unilaterally.”<sup>88</sup> Pakistan has the ability to unilaterally run the Afghan war. In 2013-2015, Pakistan’s ISI was conducting the Taliban’s insurgency. In 2013, Mullah Omar, the leader of the Taliban movement, died at a prominent hospital in Karachi, Pakistan. However, Pakistan’s ISI managed to keep his death hidden for two years.<sup>89</sup> In those two years, from 2013-2015, the Taliban’s insurgency was flourishing without its leader due to Pakistan’s support.

Also, veto player players have the ability to exacerbate a conflict. Cunningham’s research proves that the stronger the veto player is, the more intense a conflict will be. In Afghanistan, the Taliban’s insurgency intensifies every year. In July 2018, the United Nations observed that the reported civilian casualties in the war in Afghanistan has hit its record highest.<sup>90</sup> Currently, the

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<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> Cunningham, “Veto Players and Civil War Duration”, 879.

<sup>89</sup> Gerald F. Hyman, “Implausible Deniability: Pakistan and Mullah Omar’s Death, (Washington D.C., The National Interest, 2015).

<sup>90</sup> “Afghanistan: Civilian deaths hit record high, says UN,” (Doha, Al Jazeera, 2018).

Taliban threaten nearly 70% of Afghanistan's territory, more than it ever has since 2001.<sup>91</sup> With Pakistan's support, the Taliban will continue to expand its influence and intensify its insurgency in Afghanistan.

According to Cunningham's study, a veto player must approve the outcome of a war and the negotiation process leading to end of a war. In Afghanistan, the termination of the current intrastate conflict will only occur when Pakistan deems it in its interest to end the war. Pakistan will only end the war in the scenario that the Taliban comes to power. Otherwise, Pakistan won't approve to end to the current conflict because Pakistan deems its interests as irreconcilable to Kabul's interests. Pakistan perceives that an Afghanistan marred and crippled in warfare is to its interest. Therefore, as a significant veto player, Pakistan will continue to sponsor the Taliban and prolong the current phase of Afghanistan's intrastate conflict.

## **Iran**

### **History of Afghanistan-Iran Relations**

In the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, as Afghanistan established its internationally recognized borders, disputes over Afghanistan's water has been a major source of tension between Tehran and Kabul. Both countries suffer from a shortage of water.<sup>92</sup> Iran's provinces that neighbor Afghanistan rely heavily on Afghanistan's Helmand River and Hari River as a source of water. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Washington was the main mediator between Tehran and Kabul, encouraging both

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<sup>91</sup> Shoaib Sharifi and Louise Adamou, "Taliban threaten 70% of Afghanistan, BBC finds," (Kabul, BBC, 2018).

<sup>92</sup> Andrew Houk, "Transboundary Water Sharing: Iran and Afghanistan," (Washington D.C., Stimson, 2011).

governments to share its water resources. In 1939, Iran and Afghanistan signed a water-sharing treaty. However, according to the Atlantic Council, Afghanistan failed to ratify the treaty.<sup>93</sup> Then, with Washington's leadership, a U.S.-led commission, the Helmand Delta River Commission, concluded that 22 cubic meters of water per second should go to Iran via Afghanistan. However, Afghanistan rejected the recommendation given by the commission. Also, Iran sought to receive a greater share of Afghanistan's water than the amount recommended by the commission.

Subsequent to the recommendation prescribed by the Helmand Delta River Commission, four years of intense negotiation ensued between Kabul and Tehran, leading to a water-sharing agreement in 1973. The agreement stated that 22 cubic meters of water per second would go to Iran and that it would have the option to purchase an additional four cubic meters per second.<sup>94</sup> However, in that same year, the political upheaval in Kabul and Iran's political upheaval in 1979 prevented the full implementation of the water-sharing agreement. As a result of these upheavals, the political landscapes of Tehran and Kabul clashed. Subsequently, political issues emerged at the forefront of Tehran-Kabul relations while the water dispute was placed on the back-burner.

From 1979-2001, clashing political ideologies defined the relationship between Tehran and Kabul. Following the Islamic Revolution led by Ayatollah Khomeini, Tehran denounced the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan and the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul. Iran utilized the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as an opportunity to establish a strong-proxy network in Afghanistan. The Iranian government mainly backed Hezb-e-Wahdat, an Afghan-Shia political party, led by Abdul Ali Mazari against the Soviet-backed regimes in Kabul.

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<sup>93</sup> Fatemeh Aman, "Water Dispute Escalating between Iran and Afghanistan," (Washington D.C., Atlantic Council 2016).

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid*, 2.



Shortly after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, in 1980, as Saddam Hussein initiated the Iraq-Iran war by attacking Iran, Tehran's involvement in Afghanistan decreased. Due to the Iran-Iraq war, Iran diverted most of its resources and attention to its war with Iraq to preserve the gains of Khomeini's Islamic revolution. Although, Iran's aid to Hezb-e-Wahdat was relatively less than the aid that the other Sunni-dominated Mujahideen factions received in Pakistan, due to Iran's aid, Hezb-e-Wahdat remained a strong political and militaristic force in Afghanistan.

The end of the Iran-Iraq war coincided with the Soviet withdrawal of Afghanistan. In 1989, as the Soviets withdrew and as Iran neutralized the Iraqi threat, Tehran expended a significant sum of its resources to Hezb-e Wahdat. As the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul crumbled, Iran backed its proxy, Hezb-e Wahdat, in the gruesome Mujahideen civil war that ensued until 1996.

In 1996, following the Taliban's reign over Kabul, Tehran backed the UIFSA. From 1996-2001, Tehran supported the UIFSA's campaign of resisting the Taliban's control over large swaths of Afghanistan's territory. Iran sent weapons to the UIFSA via the Central Asian Republics.

Iran was committed to countering the Taliban because the Taliban denounced the Iranian regime. According to a report published by Rand Corporation, the Taliban "Viewed Shia-dominated Iran as a heresy."<sup>95</sup> The Taliban maintained a tough stance against Iran due to the backing it received from Iran's arch-rival, Saudi Arabia.

Furthermore, Iran was dedicated to resisting the Taliban's movement into Afghanistan due to the Taliban's support for subversive groups that were against the Iranian regime. A matter of great concern to Tehran was that "The Taliban were also secretly backing Iranian groups who were

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<sup>95</sup> Alireza Nader, Ali G. Scotten, Ahmad Idrees Rahmani, Robert Stewart, Leila Mahnad, "Iran's Influence in Afghanistan Implications for the U.S. Drawdown," (Santa Monica, RAND Corporation, 2014)8.

anti-regime. In Kandahar, the Taliban had given sanctuary to Ahl-e-Sunnah Wal Jamaat, which recruited Iranian Sunni militants from Khorasan and Sistan provinces.”<sup>96</sup>

Nearly a year after Tehran’s assistance to the UIFSA, on June 2<sup>nd</sup> 1997, the Taliban closed Iran’s embassy in Kabul. According to Rashid, “The Taliban were incensed with Iran’s support for the alliance...the Taliban closed down the Iranian Embassy in Kabul, accusing Iran of destroying peace and stability in Afghanistan.”<sup>97</sup>

In March 1998, Tehran’s relationship with the Taliban had deteriorated unprecedentedly. The relationship between the Taliban and Tehran soured when the Taliban killed nine Iranian diplomats in the Afghan city of Mazar-i-Sharif. Following the Taliban’s killings, Iran considered invading Afghanistan on the basis of “Defend[ing] the security of its citizens.”<sup>98</sup> Along with Iranian popular support, hardliners in Tehran “Were calling for the invasion of the western provinces of Afghanistan.”<sup>99</sup> However, Iran didn’t invade Afghanistan as the Taliban threatened to retaliate in the scenario of an Iranian invasion, stating that, “Iran must know that if the soil of Afghanistan is attacked, we will target Iranian cities and the entire responsibility will rest with Iranian authorities.” In that same year, from 1998, until the demise of the Taliban’s regime, the Taliban halted the flow of water from Helmand’s Kajaki dam to Iran. From 1998-2001, tension persisted between Tehran and the Taliban. Iran continued to support the UIFSA’s resistance, while the Taliban was assisted by Islamabad and Riyadh to counter the UIFSA.

Due to the Taliban’s hostility with Iran, in 2001, Iran welcomed the United States overthrow of the Taliban’s regime.<sup>100</sup> Although Tehran is an opponent of Washington, Iran’s

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<sup>96</sup> Rashid, *The Taliban*, 203.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> Douglas Jehl, “Iran Holds Taliban Responsible for 9 Diplomats’ Deaths,” (New York City, The New York Times, 1998).

<sup>99</sup> Rashid, *The Taliban*, 204.

<sup>100</sup> Nader, Scotten, Rahmani, Stewart, Mahnad, “Iran’s Influence in Afghanistan”, 8-9.

embracement of the United States' overthrow of the Taliban's regime was out of its own interest. Tehran vehemently opposed the presence of a Saudi-backed group in neighboring Afghanistan. Following the demise of the Taliban's regime, Iran persuaded key members of the UIFSA to cooperate with the international communities' efforts to form an interim government in Kabul.<sup>101</sup> In the years subsequent to 2001, the political confrontation between Kabul and Tehran decreased significantly. However, the relationship between Tehran and Kabul was defined by a new set of challenges: narcotics, the Afghan refugee population in Iran, and the U.S. presence in Afghanistan.<sup>102</sup> In recent years, despite these new set of challenges, Tehran's and Kabul's century-old water dispute on has been the main source of tension between both states.

In the years following 2001, the regimes in Kabul has made reconstruction and development a priority of the war-torn country. Kabul's reconstruction plan includes the development of dams to effectively manage Afghanistan's water, to improve Afghanistan's agricultural capabilities, and to ultimately boost economic growth. At the same time, the water dispute between Iran and Afghanistan was placed on Tehran's political agenda to negotiate with Kabul.<sup>103</sup> Following the interim regime in Kabul, till date, Tehran has pushed to maximize its flow of water although, according to Article 5 of the 1973 treaty, Tehran pledged to not claim more than the agreed 22 cubic meters per second with an additional purchase of 4 cubic meters per second.<sup>104</sup> Nevertheless, despite Tehran's demands, the subsequent regimes in Kabul since the fall of the Taliban, have been working with its international partners to build dams, thereby angering Tehran.

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<sup>101</sup> James Dobbins, "Negotiating with Iran: Reflections from Personal Experience", (Milton Park, Taylor & Francis, 2009).

<sup>102</sup> Nader, Scotten, Rahmani, Stewart, Mahnad, "Iran's Influence in Afghanistan", 18-21.

<sup>103</sup> Aman, "Water Dispute Escalating", 5.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid*, 4-7.

Furthermore, in recent years, the tension on Afghanistan's water has increased due to a drought that has stricken the western provinces of Afghanistan and the eastern provinces of Iran. The tension regarding the water dispute is also exacerbated by the blame-game. Officials from Tehran and Kabul have been accusing its counterpart of not abiding by the 1973 treaty.

The tensions regarding the water dispute was highlighted last year as the heads of state in Kabul and Tehran made public statements on Afghanistan's water resources. In 2017, Iran's President, Hassan Rouhani, denounced the Afghan government's developmental plan to construct dams in various provinces. Rouhani stated that, "We cannot remain indifferent to the issue [water dams] which is apparently damaging our environment...Construction of several dams in Afghanistan, such as Kajaki, Kamal Khan, Salma and others in the north and south of Afghanistan, affect our Khorasan and Sistan-Baluchistan provinces." Not surprisingly, his remarks were met with backlash in Afghanistan. Not only did Afghans protest against Rouhani's statements, in response to his remarks, Ashraf Ghani, the president of Afghanistan, stated that, "Water is another major resource for Afghanistan...We are already investing in dams and irrigation infrastructure to raise agricultural productivity, and as technical designs are completed we will be accelerating investment in this sector that is key for both growth and poverty reduction."<sup>105</sup>As Afghanistan continues its reconstruction plans by building dams, tensions with Iran over the flow of water will not only persist but will be inevitable.

### **Iran's role in the current Afghan conflict (2001-Present)**

Although Iran maintains official ties with the government in Kabul, Iran also maintains

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<sup>105</sup> "President Ghani's Remarks At Joint Coordination Monitoring Board Meeting", ( Kabul, Office of the President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2017).

covert ties with the Taliban. Iran pursues this dual-track policy as a means to further advance its national interests. Tehran's official ties with Kabul heavily revolves around its economic interests. Tehran's covert ties with the Taliban are heavily influenced by Iran's national security interests.

Tehran's covert ties with the Taliban have played a larger role in the current phase of the conflict in Afghanistan rather than its official ties with the Afghan government. In the current conflict in Afghanistan, Iran is a third-party actor. Iran's intervention in Afghanistan as a third-party actor that supports the Taliban has contributed to prolonging the war.

Lindsay's and Enterline's study proves that the type of intervention by a third-party actor is carried out on the basis of calculations based on the benefits and national interests of the third-party actor.<sup>106</sup> In Afghanistan, Tehran deems it in its interest to support the Taliban. Although Iran's support for the Taliban is irrelevant to the goals of the Taliban, Iran still supports the Taliban. The Taliban seeks the withdrawal of international forces whereas, Tehran prefers the presence of international forces in Kabul rather than the imminent take over of Afghanistan by the Taliban, supported by Riyadh. Yet, as a third-party actor Tehran supports the Taliban's insurgency.

In May 2018, the United States' Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, stated that Iran supports the Taliban.<sup>107</sup> However, Iran's support for the Taliban can be traced back to the early years of the Taliban's second phase of incursion into Afghanistan. As early as 2005, Iran supported the Taliban's war efforts.<sup>108</sup> Not only has Iran provided the Taliban with the resource they require to continue its insurgency, Iran has also provided the Taliban with the training it needs to further strengthen its insurgency.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Dylan Balch-Lindsay, Andrew J. Enterline and Kyle A. Joyce, "Third-Party Intervention and the Civil War Process", (Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications, 2008).

<sup>107</sup> "Iran Supporting Taliban in Form of Weapons, Funding: Pompeo," (Kabul, Tolo News, 2018).

<sup>108</sup> Dean Nelson, "Wikileaks Afghanistan: Iran accused of supporting Taliban attacks," (London, The Telegraph, 2010).

<sup>109</sup> Anthony Loyd, "Taliban's best fighters being trained by Iran," (London, The Times, 2018).

Although in the 1990s, the Taliban opposed Iran, in the second phase of the Taliban's insurgency, the Taliban has become more accommodating to the interests of regional powers, including Iran. After 2001, the Taliban is no longer an anti-Shia group that seeks confrontation with Iran. Hence, Iran supports the Taliban to strengthen its insurgency while the Taliban assists Iran to secure its interest in Afghanistan.

Iran's support for the Taliban is tied to its water security.<sup>110</sup> As Afghanistan desires to manage the flow of its water by building dams, Iran seeks to halt the construction of these dams. Iran views the establishment of dams in Afghanistan as a threat to its national interests. Iran views the dams as a threat to its interest because not only are Iran's eastern provinces heavily dependent on Afghanistan's water but, Iran's eastern provinces have been inflicted with severe drought in the recent years. Therefore, Iran is keen on maximizing the flow of water from Afghanistan to its eastern provinces.

To hinder the progress of the construction of dams in Afghanistan, Iran supports the Taliban. Ali Ahmad, an Afghan police officer guarding the construction of a dam in the Nimruz province of Afghanistan, told *The Guardian* that, "When work on the dam begins, of course security will worsen."<sup>111</sup> The security near the development sites of these dams deteriorate because Iran assists the Taliban to carry out attacks near these site. In 2011, according to *The Guardian*, "a captured Taliban commander claimed to have received \$ 50,000 and military training in Iran to sabotage the Kamal Khan dam."<sup>112</sup> Tehran abets the Taliban to bring insecurity to these sites because Tehran seeks to delay the development of these dams to

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<sup>110</sup> Sabera Azizi, "Pakistan and Iran Keep Fueling Taliban Terror Tactics," (Washington D.C., The National Interest, 2018).

<sup>111</sup> Sune Engel Rasmussen, "Water Dam Project Promises Water – but also Conflict – for Dusty Afghan Border Lands," ( London, The Guardian, 2017).

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

maximize the flow of water to Iran. In an effort to halt the construction of these dams, Iran supports the Taliban's insurgency by providing it with training, funds, and resources. In return, the Taliban attacks the construction sites of the dams in the provinces that neighbor Iran.

Furthermore, as I've noted in an article for the *National Interest*, Iran fuels instability in Afghanistan by supporting the Taliban "When its relationship with Washington deteriorates. Tehran uses Afghanistan as a leverage to exert pressure on the United States. Specifically, Iran does this by arming and training the Taliban to carry out attacks, raising the costs of war for Washington. Nearly a week after President Trump announced his decision to withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal, Iran helped the Taliban lead a major offensive in Farah.<sup>113</sup> As Tehran calculated, the Taliban was pushed back from Farah only when American special forces entered the combat zone."<sup>114</sup>

In the current phase of the conflict in Afghanistan, Iran is exploiting the devastating security situation in Afghanistan to its advantage by supporting the Taliban. As a third-party actor, Tehran lacks the intimate relationship that Islamabad enjoys with the Taliban. However, Iran's support for the Taliban is only possible due to Islamabad's overarching support for the Taliban in Afghanistan. In this phase of the conflict, Tehran is fanning the flames of insecurity that was ignited by Pakistan to further advance its own interests. Given Tehran's interests in Afghanistan, Iran will continue to support the Taliban's insurgency to gain the Taliban's cooperation to secure its interests in Afghanistan.

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<sup>113</sup> Mohammad Habibzada, "Did Iran Have Anything to Do With Farah's Attack?" ( Washington D.C., Voice of America, 2018).

<sup>114</sup> Azizi, "Pakistan and Iran Keep Fueling Taliban".

## **Saudi Arabia**

### **History of Afghanistan- Saudi Arabia Relations**

In the modern history of the ties between Riyadh and Kabul, up until the 1970s, Afghanistan's relations with Riyadh was warm but diplomatic interaction was limited. On the basis of religion, Afghanistan, an Islamic country, had friendly ties with Saudi Arabia, the custodian of Islam's two holy mosques. However, Afghanistan's foreign policy of non-alignment during the Cold War hindered it from establishing strong ties with the western bloc and its allies, including Riyadh. It was only in 1977 that Afghanistan's President, Mohammad Daud, revamped his foreign policy and sought to strengthen its ties with the western bloc. As a result of this foreign policy shift, Daud increased his visits to Saudi Arabia. However, the warm ties between Riyadh and Kabul was short-lived as Daud's regime came to an end on April 28 1978.

Riyadh's relationship with Kabul took a sharp turn on April 30, 1978 as Nur Mohammad Taraki, the Soviet-backed leader, came to power. Riyadh opposed the regime in Kabul and shared Pakistan's and Washington's interests of providing funds and arms to the Mujahideen. From 1978-1989, Riyadh provided significant aid to the Mujahideen to undermine the regimes in Kabul and to weaken the Soviet's military campaign in Afghanistan. Riyadh also provided funds to madrassas that were dedicated to educating Afghan refugees in Pakistan. Overall, Saudi Arabia's aid to the Mujahideen came from two channels. According to Tomsen, "Saudi funding for the anti-Soviet Afghan jihad moved through two pipelines. One was managed by Prince Turki al-Faisal, the nephew of the king and head of the king's external intelligence agency, General Intelligence Directorate (GID). Most of the aid Turki managed was integrated into the CIA's covert weapons program. The Saudi government matched the American contribution dollar for dollar. The CIA



purchased the weapons and handled the transportation logistics until the cargo was transferred to the ISI in Pakistan. Turki and Yusef Motabbankani, the Saudi Ambassador in Islamabad, distributed millions more in cash to radical Sunni Mujahidin politicians, ulema, and commanders in Pakistan who advocated a future Afghanistan ruled by sharia. The second “private” Saudi pipeline splintered into innumerable public and private charities and individual donors. It was much larger, though no one ever knew how large, given the complete lack of oversight by any government entity.”<sup>115</sup> However, as the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan, Riyadh shifted most of its aid to Abdul Rab Rassoul Sayyaf and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, two figures from the Afghan Mujahideen that were closely aligned with Riyadh.

In 1992, as the Soviet-backed regime in Afghanistan collapsed, an interim government led by Sibgatullah Mujaddidi and subsequently led by Burhanuddin Rabbani were undermined by elements of the Mujahideen who were backed by regional powers. Riyadh maintained its close ties with Sayyaf and Hekmatyar and armed them in the brutal civil war that proceeded until the Taliban’s takeover. In the early 1990s, Riyadh was keen on using its proxies in Afghanistan to counter Iran’s influence in Afghanistan and the influence of Afghan political elites that adhered to Shi’ism.<sup>116</sup>

Riyadh’s anti-government activities against the internationally recognized Afghan government continued throughout the first phase of the Taliban’s insurgency. Not only was Saudi Arabia one of the three countries that officially recognized the Taliban’s government but Riyadh also viewed the Taliban “As an important asset to their dwindling influence in Afghanistan.”<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Tomsen, *The Wars of Afghanistan*, 195-199.

<sup>116</sup> Rashid, *The Taliban*, 201.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

Saudi Arabia opposed the U.N. recognized Afghan government for two reasons. Foremost, Riyadh was skeptical of Rabbani's government due to its friendly ties with Iran. Secondly, Pakistan, a key ally of Riyadh, vehemently opposed members of the UIFSA within Rabbani's government. Not only did Riyadh's and Islamabad's support for the Taliban affect Afghanistan but it affected the entire region. According to Rashid, the Taliban's advances inside Afghanistan "Infuriated Russia, Turkey, and the Central Asian states who blamed Pakistan and Saudi Arabia for backing the Taliban."<sup>118</sup>

Riyadh undermined the official Afghan government by funding the Taliban.<sup>119</sup> In fact, Riyadh played an active role in strengthening the Taliban's insurgency. Since the Taliban's inception, Riyadh had a significant role in the Taliban's movement. Foremost, Saudi Arabia funded the madrassas in Pakistan that cultivated the Taliban's mindset. As the Taliban's movement shifted to Afghanistan from Pakistan, Riyadh supplied the Taliban with fuel, money, weapons, and pick-up trucks.<sup>120</sup> Prior to the Taliban seizing Kabul, according to Rashid, "The Saudi intelligence chief Prince Turki al Faisal visited Islamabad and Kandahar in July 1996 to discuss with the ISI a new plan to take Kabul, and both countries stepped up supplies to the Taliban."<sup>121</sup> Moreover, Riyadh bribed key Afghan commanders to surrender Afghanistan's territory to the Taliban. According to Rashid, "Pakistan and Saudi Arabia helped engineer the surrender and eventual flight of the head of the Jalalabad Shura, Haji Abdul Qadeer."<sup>122</sup> With the help of Riyadh and Islamabad, the Taliban successfully captured not only the eastern provinces of Afghanistan but eventually most of Afghanistan's territory from Rabbani's government.

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<sup>118</sup> Rashid, *The Taliban*, 77.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid*, 201-203.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid*, 45-48.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid*, 198.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid*.

In 1998, as the Taliban continued to expand northwards, every major offensive remained strategically planned by Pakistan's ISI and funded by Riyadh. Given Riyadh's intimate ties with the Taliban and Riyadh's anti-Iran policy, as the Taliban marched into Mazar-i-Sharif, the Taliban massacred Hazaras, Afghans who mainly share Iran's religious faith.<sup>123</sup> According to Rashid, with Riyadh's blessing, "the Taliban aimed to cleanse the north of Shia."<sup>124</sup>

Towards the end of the first phase of the Taliban's insurgency, Riyadh's relations with the Taliban declined. According to Rashid, "only when Prince Turki was personally insulted by Mullah Omar in Kandahar did the Saudis curtail diplomatic links to the Taliban."<sup>125</sup> Diplomatic ties between the Taliban and Riyadh were curtailed but remained until September 2001.<sup>126</sup> Covertly, through the ISI, Riyadh continued to fund the Taliban until 2001.

In 2001, as the Taliban's regime collapsed, Riyadh reset its official relations with Kabul. Riyadh supported the interim regime in Kabul led by Karzai. Since then, Riyadh has officially supported every regime in Kabul. However, Riyadh's policy on Afghanistan continues to be conducted vis-à-vis Pakistan's interests in Afghanistan. As a result of this, Riyadh covertly supports the Taliban while maintaining its official ties with Kabul.

### **Saudi Arabia's role in the current Afghan conflict (2001-Present)**

In my article, "Pakistan and Iran Keep Fueling Taliban Terror Tactics" in the *National Interest*, I noted that currently, "Riyadh's support for the Taliban is rooted in its special relationship with Pakistan. Pakistan is a key ally and strategic partner of Riyadh in the region.

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<sup>123</sup> Rashid, *The Taliban*, 73-75.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid*, 74.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid*, 202.

<sup>126</sup> "Saudis break diplomatic ties with Taliban," (CNN, 2001).

Ghazanfar Ali Khan, a writer for *Arab News*, defines the relationship between Riyadh and Islamabad as ‘a vast and dynamic web of cooperative linkages, age-old bonds of friendship and undertakings, dating from well before the establishment of diplomatic relations and growing continuously year-on-year.’<sup>127</sup> Similarly, Bruce Riedel, an expert on South Asia, notes that ‘The Saudi kingdom has a longstanding and intimate relationship with Pakistan . . . They have had a deep strategic military relationship for decades.’<sup>128</sup> Both Riyadh and Islamabad are key actors in advancing each others’ core foreign policy goals. To demonstrate: In February, Pakistan committed nearly one thousand troops to Saudi Arabia as Riyadh blocked Washington's efforts to list Pakistan on an international terror-financing watch list.”<sup>129</sup> As Pakistan continues to use the Taliban as an asset, Riyadh as Pakistan’s strategic ally, will continue to support the Taliban.

In that regard, as Riyadh supports Pakistan’s strategic policies, Islamabad also supports Riyadh’s foreign policy goals. On November 26, 2017, Riyadh launched the Islamic Counter-Terrorism Coalition. The counter-terrorism coalition is not only designed to counter Iran’s Revolutionary Guards but it’s also a pillar of Riyadh’s foreign policy.<sup>130</sup> Pakistan is a key supporter of this coalition. Given Riyadh’s special relationship with Islamabad, not surprisingly, the commander-in-chief of the Islamic Counter-Terrorism Coalition is Raheel Sharif, Pakistan’s former chief of army staff. In that light, as Saudi Arabia seeks to strengthen its partnership with Islamabad to increase its militaristic capabilities and to strengthen the

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<sup>127</sup> Ghazanfar Ali Khan, “Saudi-Pakistan ties — strong and getting stronger,” (Riyadh, Arab News, 2017).

<sup>128</sup> Bruce Reidel, “Saudi Arabia: Nervously Watching Pakistan,” (Washington D.C., Brookings Institute, 2008).

<sup>129</sup> Saeed Shah and Ian Talley, “Saudi Arabia Stymies U.S. Over Pakistan Terror List,” (The Wall Street Journal, 2018).

<sup>130</sup> Chase Winter, “Saudi-led Islamic military alliance: counterterrorism or counter Iran?” (Deutsche Welle, 2017).

Islamic Counter-Terrorism Coalition, Riyadh will continue to support Pakistan's pro-Taliban policy.

Furthermore, the Saudi's financial support to the Taliban remains an open secret.<sup>131</sup> In 2005 and subsequently, Riyadh increased its financial support to the Taliban at Pakistan's request. A Saudi intelligence officer told the *Afghanistan Times*, a local Afghan news agency, that "When Taliban with the help of Pakistan asked us for financial support for their war against the government of Afghanistan...we accepted to help them without any hesitance."<sup>132</sup> Likewise, Saudi officials turn a blind eye when the Taliban are collecting funds under their watch in Saudi Arabia. In 2009, American officials complained that the Taliban were raising millions of dollars in Saudi Arabia to support its insurgency.<sup>133</sup>

Carlotta Gall, an expert on Afghanistan, noted that "Despite those covert efforts, the Saudi kingdom, publicly and officially, has been largely absent in Afghanistan. While paying lip service to the American mission, Saudi Arabia has not built a significant project in its own name in Afghanistan in 15 years."<sup>134</sup> Although Riyadh has official ties with the government in Kabul, its interaction with Kabul is very limited. Rather, its covert role in the Afghan war has significantly impacted the conflict.

In the current phase of the conflict in Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia is a third-party actor, facilitating the financial expenses of the Taliban. Although the Taliban is no longer an anti-Shia group that Riyadh cultivated it to be, Riyadh continues to support the Taliban due to its special

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<sup>131</sup> Azizi, "Pakistan and Iran Keep Fueling Taliban."

<sup>132</sup> "In response to Pakistan request: Saudi, Qatar admit supporting Taliban," (Kabul, *Afghanistan Times*, 2017).

<sup>133</sup> Carlotta Gall, "Saudis Bankroll Taliban, Even as King Officially Supports Afghan Government," (New York City, *The New York Times*, 2016).

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*

bilateral relationship with Pakistan. Given Riyadh's strategic partnership with Islamabad, Saudi Arabia is likely to continue to exacerbate the war by lending its support to the Taliban.

### **Addressing the counter-argument**

Recently, political analysts of the war in Afghanistan argue that Riyadh has shifted its policy on Afghanistan. Analysts argue that Riyadh no longer supports the Taliban based on two instances. Firstly, analysts state that Riyadh's condemnation of Qatar's role in Afghanistan signals a shift in Riyadh's policy on Afghanistan. Secondly, analysts argue that Riyadh's initiation to host an ulema conference on Afghanistan depicts Riyadh's support for stability in Afghanistan. However, both of these interpretations are misleading.

Last year, in an event in Kabul, Mishari al-Harbi, a senior Saudi diplomat, said that "Qatar has harbored leaders of a number of terrorist groups and it is backing terrorist groups in Afghanistan."<sup>135</sup> Analysts assume that al-Harbi was referring to the Taliban although he never explicitly identified the Taliban as a terrorist group. Secondly, if al-Harbi was referring to the Taliban, his rhetoric still doesn't indicate a shift in Saudi's policy. Rather, Riyadh's condemnation of Qatar's pro-Taliban policy is rooted in its rivalry with Qatar. In the *National Interest*, I've noted that "Riyadh's tough stance on Qatar is due to its competition with Doha as both states seek to exert greater influence in the Middle East and North Africa."<sup>136</sup> Saudi Arabia's commendation of Qatar is a convenient strategy employed by Riyadh to undermine its rival's credibility as a responsible state.

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<sup>135</sup> Shadi Khan Saif, "Saudi envoy criticizes Qatari backing of Afghan Taliban," (Ankara, Anadolu Agency, 2017).

<sup>136</sup> Azizi, "Pakistan and Iran Keep Fueling Taliban."

Moreover, on July 2018, Riyadh collaborated with the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) to convene a two-day conference on peace and stability in Afghanistan.<sup>137</sup> Analysts interpreted the conference hosted by Saudi Arabia as evidence that Saudi Arabia condemns the Taliban and supports peace in Afghanistan. However, the declaration adopted at the conference indicates that Riyadh continues to support the Taliban. In the conference, Riyadh failed to identify the Taliban's role in the war in Afghanistan. Riyadh didn't acknowledge that the Taliban is the major destabilizing factor in Afghanistan. Rather, the main message conveyed in the conference was that Kabul and the Taliban should make peace. Riyadh's message is simply lip-service that is also reiterated by other regional sponsors of the Taliban. An indication of a true change in Riyadh's policy would be Riyadh's acknowledgment and denouncement of the Taliban's ruthless war in Afghanistan, which is yet to be done.

## **Russia**

### **History of Afghanistan-Russia relations**

The 1950s marked the beginning of strengthened ties between Moscow and Kabul.<sup>138</sup> Under Mohammad Daud's leadership, Afghanistan's prime minister, he initiated a series of rapid developmental plans that required large sums of money in the form of foreign aid.<sup>139</sup> Afghanistan's northern neighbor, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR), provided Daud with the

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<sup>137</sup>“Declaration International Ulema Conference for Peace and Security in Afghanistan” (Organization of Islamic Cooperation, 2018).

<sup>138</sup> R. K. Ramazani, “Afghanistan and the USSR,” (Washington D.C., Middle East Institute, 1958).

<sup>139</sup> M. S. Noorzoy, “Long-Term Economic Relations between Afghanistan and the Soviet Union: An Interpretive Study”, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985).

assistance that he sought to fulfill his developmental ambitions. Along with Soviet aid, thousands of Soviet advisors trickled into Afghanistan. From 1954-1967, Afghanistan received the third most Soviet aid to developing countries.<sup>140</sup>

On October 1, 1964, despite Afghanistan's political transition to a constitutional monarchy, Moscow maintained strong ties with the political elites in Kabul. As Daud lost his power, Moscow strengthened its ties with the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). With Moscow's support, the PDPA became a strong political force during Afghanistan's experiment with democracy.

However, Afghanistan's period of liberalization came to an end in 1973 when Daud overthrew the regime in Kabul. During Daud's reign as the first president of the Republic of Afghanistan, the strong bilateral relationship between Moscow and Kabul not only resumed but intensified for the first two years of his reign. In 1975, Daud revamped his government. He outlawed every political party, including the Soviet-backed PDPA, except for his own party, National Revolutionary Party. Much to the dismay of the Soviets, Daud also purged key members of the PDPA within his government and reverted to Afghanistan's traditional policy of genuine neutrality. Daud shifted his foreign policy from one that favored strong relations with Moscow at the cost of distancing his regime from the western states to one that favored friendly relations with both the West and Moscow. As a result of this foreign policy shift, Daud welcomed western advisors to various provinces in Afghanistan, including the northern provinces. The presence of western advisors in Afghanistan's northern provinces agitated the members of the Soviet Politburo. In 1977, the Politburo, worried of western influence near its border, invited Daud to Moscow. During Daud's trip to Moscow, Leonid Brezhnev requested Daud to get rid of the Western experts

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<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*



in the northern provinces. In *Khaama Press*, an Afghan news agency, I noted that, “Daud viewed Brezhnev’s request as an interference in Afghanistan’s affairs. He refused and said, ‘Afghanistan shall remain poor, if necessary, but free in its acts and decision.’ He ended the meeting abruptly and said, ‘We will never allow you to dictate to us how to run our country and whom to employ in Afghanistan...After that meeting, Moscow united the two bitter factions of the...[PDPA]... in preparation for the coup against Daud. On April 28, 1978, Soviet planes flew over Arg, the Afghan presidential palace. The Soviets bombarded the presidential palace and overthrew Daud’s regime. Subsequently, Moscow installed Nur Mohammad Taraki as the president of Afghanistan.”<sup>141</sup>

During Taraki’s reign, Moscow’s relationship with Kabul deepened significantly.<sup>142</sup> Taraki not only brought Afghanistan into the Soviet bloc but Afghanistan also became the Soviet’s client state. However, Moscow’s warm relations with Kabul was short-lived. On October 8, 1979, Taraki was assassinated as a result of deepened internal rifts between members of the PDPA. Subsequently, Hafizullah Amin succeeded Taraki. However, the Soviets were skeptical of Amin. Moscow claimed that he was a CIA agent.<sup>143</sup> Although Moscow continued maintaining official ties with Amin’s regime, Amin’s reign over Kabul made the Politburo uneasy. As a result, on December 25, 1979, the Soviets invaded Afghanistan and assassinated Amin two days later. Moscow’s invasion had two purposes, to overthrow Amin’s regime and to regain its grip and influence over Kabul.

Shortly after the Soviet-led coup against Amin, Babrak Karmal was installed as the succeeding president of Afghanistan. On December 27, 1979, at 8 p.m. Karmal announced himself as the president of Afghanistan from a radio station in Tajikistan. Karmal’s installation coincided

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<sup>141</sup> Azizi, “The Tragedy of Russian Politics.”

<sup>142</sup> Riedel, *What We Won*, 17-19.

<sup>143</sup> William Blum, *Killing Hope: US Military and CIA Interventions Since World War II*, (Monroe, Common Courage Press, 343).

with an increase of popular resistance and resentment against the regime in Kabul and the Soviet presence in Afghanistan. Due to the local's increased opposition against the Soviet's presence, Moscow assisted the Afghan regime to suppress the opposition until 1989.

After a decade of war, on February 15, 1989, the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan. In Kabul, the Moscow-backed Mohammad Najibullah presided over the Arg. Najibullah remained in power until 1992. Although Najibullah's government was plagued with internal rifts, Moscow's dwindling support to him led to the demise of his regime. In 1992, as the Soviet Union dissolved, Moscow was no longer interested in backing Najibullah's government. As Moscow was undergoing a political transformation, Boris Yeltsin was not only the first president of the Russian Federation but he also represented a new hope for Russia. According to the *L.A. Times*, Yeltsin, "Was one of the harshest critics of the Soviet presence in Afghanistan and then of the continuing aid."<sup>144</sup> Moscow was ready to move on and heal itself from its "bleeding wound" by distancing itself from Kabul.

Moscow's relationship with the Afghan government intensified once again in 1996. As the Taliban's insurgency was seizing large chunks of Afghanistan's territory, Moscow assisted the official government of Afghanistan led by Burhanuddin Rabbani. Through Tajikistan, Moscow sent aid to Ahmad Shah Massoud, a key figure in Rabbani's government and in the UIFSA. During the 1990s, Moscow was wary of the Taliban's encroachment of Afghanistan. Moscow was worried that the Taliban's insurgency would have a spillover effect and incite similar movements in its backyard, Central Asia. Moscow remained a key supporter of the Rabbani's government until 2001.

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<sup>144</sup> Mark Fineman, "Afghans—Adrift in Soviet Past: Kabul is left in the ruins of a crumbled empire. A Soviet aid cutoff is expected to bring down the regime--but even its critics fear the ensuing power vacuum," (Los Angeles, Los Angeles Times, 1991).

On October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2001, due to the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, the United States initiated its campaign against the Taliban's regime. Moscow supported Washington's mission of overthrowing the Taliban. Subsequent to the demise of the Taliban's regime, an interim government led by Hamid Karzai took power. Since Karzai's regime, Moscow has remained official ties with the governments in Kabul.

However, Moscow's initial enthusiasm for Washington's presence in Afghanistan was short-lived. As the Taliban regained its strength and as the war in Afghanistan intensified, Moscow became anxious of Washington's continued presence in the region. As a result of this agitation, Moscow cultivated covert ties with the Taliban while maintaining its official ties with Kabul.

### **Russia's role in the current Afghan conflict (2001-Present)**

Moscow's relationship with Kabul declined in 2004. Nearly three years after eagerly embracing the Afghan interim government, as Moscow's relations with the West deteriorated over Ukraine, Moscow became uneasy of Washington's presence in Afghanistan. In 2006, Moscow halted all military aid to Kabul.

However, by 2009, Karzai's relationship with Washington was severely strained because he distrusted Washington, often accusing it of working against him.<sup>145</sup> As a result of Karzai's paranoia, he warmed up to other governments. Karzai reset his relationship with Moscow by initiating contact with the Kremlin. In 2010, Moscow resumed its developmental and military aid to Afghanistan.<sup>146</sup> Russia's ties with Kabul steadily increased as a result of continued diplomatic

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<sup>145</sup> Helene Copper and Carlotta Gall, "Cables Offer Shifting Portrait of Karzai," (New York City, The New York Times, 2010).

<sup>146</sup> Thomas Ruttig, "From Point Zero to 'New Warmth': Russian-Afghan relations since 1989," (Kabul, Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2014).

interactions between the two governments. The relationship between Kabul and Moscow was moving towards a path of increased cooperation until the succeeding Afghan government steered away from Karzai's foreign policy.

In 2015, reports first emerged of Moscow's contact with the Taliban. Moscow claimed that its contact with the Taliban is due to the presence of ISKP in Afghanistan. Although Afghan officials concluded that the Taliban and ISKP are the same group merely operating under a different banner, Russia considers ISKP a threat not only to its security but to the security its allies in the Central Asian republics. In an article that I've written for *Khaama Press*, I've noted that, "in 2015, Russia publically announced that it has ties with the Taliban. Maria Zakharova, a spokeswoman for the Russian Foreign Ministry, said that the contact between Moscow and the Taliban is for intelligence-sharing and information exchange regarding the fight against ISIS...[The] Russian ambassador to Afghanistan, Alexander Mantytskiy, told the Afghan parliament that Russia and the Taliban have a shared interest in fighting ISIS.<sup>147</sup> According to Mantytskiy, ISIS wants to use the Northern provinces of Afghanistan as a starting point to expand its influence to Russia.<sup>148</sup> Although the U.S. backed Afghan government is a much larger force that is fighting [ISKP], Moscow isn't cooperating with Kabul to fight [ISKP]. Should Russia consider [ISKP] a threat, it would be more suitable to cooperate with [the] stronger force, the Afghan government, and not the Taliban."<sup>149</sup>

However, Russia prefers to cooperate with the Taliban rather than the Afghan government to counter ISKP. A senior Afghan official told the *New York Times* on the condition of

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<sup>147</sup> Gullabuddin Ghubar, "Russia, Taliban Have Shared Interests In Fighting Daesh," (Kabul, Tolo News, 2016).

<sup>148</sup> Navid Ahmad Barakzai, "NATO has failed to achieve its goals in Afghanistan: Russia," (Kabul, Pajhwok News, 2017).

<sup>149</sup> Azizi, "The Tragedy of Russian Politics."

anonymity that, “Bilaterally, we have struggled to convince the Russians on certain issues because they increasingly see us only as part of this larger game with the United States.”<sup>150</sup> I’ve stated in *Khaama Press* that, “Russia refuses to cooperate with the Afghan government’s counterterrorism efforts because it’s backed by Washington.”

Secondly, Moscow’s support for the Taliban relies heavily on its relationship with Washington. In my article, “The Tragedy of Russian Politics in Afghanistan” in *Khaama Press*, I noted that “Russia’s support for the Taliban stems from its fear of the U.S., its traditional rival, exerting greater influence in the region. Moscow [arms] the Taliban to counter and challenge the United States’ influence and efforts in Afghanistan.... [To this end, in 2016, Russia] announced its decision to not cooperate with the U.S. mission in Afghanistan... Zamir Kabulov, Putin’s special envoy to Afghanistan, iterated that, ‘honestly speaking, we’re already tired of joining anything Washington starts... We won’t join the useless events, and we’ve already told the Americans.’<sup>151</sup> Kabulov also called the American bases in Afghanistan disturbing and intolerable. In an interview with Anadolu Agency, a Turkish state-run news agency, he said ‘Of course; why should it not be disturbing for anybody? Why in Afghanistan? Where is Afghanistan and where is America!? If we did something like that in Mexico, would it not be disturbing for America? In Cuba, we have already experienced and we know the outcome. I think it is old fashioned. Why are they doing that after all this 15-year-old anti-terror rhetoric in Afghanistan? They stupidly try to say that it is for training. Come on! You are not talking to stupid or foolish people. We know the reasons [for the ongoing U.S. military presence in Afghanistan]. Russia will never tolerate

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<sup>150</sup> Mujib Mashal and Andrew E. Kramer, “Russia Pulls Back From Cooperating With U.S. on Afghanistan,” (New York City, The New York Times, 2016).

<sup>151</sup> “Russia Pulls Back From Cooperating With U.S. on Afghanistan, report,” (Kabul, Khaama Press, 2016).

this.”<sup>152</sup> Moscow arms the Taliban to raise the costs of the war for Washington by strengthening the Taliban’s offensive capabilities.

In *Khaama Press*, I’ve also observed that “Although Moscow denies arming the Taliban, there is mounting evidence that proves otherwise. Moscow has been supporting the Taliban in contested provinces.<sup>153</sup> Ghulam Farooq Sangari, the police chief of Uruzgan province, told Voice of America that, ‘Eleven Russians, including two women, dressed in doctor’s uniforms and guarded by four armed Taliban, along with an Afghan translator, have been spotted in various parts of the province... they have been enticing people against the government, providing training and teaching how to assemble land mines.’ Similarly, in Kunduz, another highly contested province, Afghan security officials told *ITVNews*, a local Afghan news agency, that ‘Russia provides weapons and military equipment for Taliban fighters in Dasht-e-Archi, Imam Sahib, Qalai Zal and Kalbat districts of Kunduz province via Tajikistan.’<sup>154</sup> In Helmand, another volatile province, Moscow provided the Taliban with a mobile clinic to treat its injured fighters. In Farah province, security officials said that Russian weapons and night vision binoculars contributed to the fall of 13 security posts to the Taliban.”<sup>155</sup>

Russia has also given the Taliban political support. Moscow acknowledges the Taliban as a credible security provider rather than the government in Kabul. Mantytskiy confirmed that Russia has “Ties to the Taliban to ensure the security of our political offices, consulates, and the security of Central Asia.”<sup>156</sup> His statement not only weakens the Afghan government’s credibility

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<sup>152</sup> “Exclusive interview with Russian diplomat Zamir Kabulov,” (Ankara, Anadolu Agency, 2016).

<sup>153</sup> Noor Zahid, “Afghan Official: Russian Advisers Help Taliban in Contested Province,” (Washington D.C., Voice of America, 2017).

<sup>154</sup> “Russia provides cash, military support to Taliban in Kunduz: sources,” (Kabul, 1TVNews, 2017).

<sup>155</sup> Azizi, “The Tragedy of Russian Politics.”

<sup>156</sup> Shabir Ahmadi, “Envoy Confirms Russia Has Relations With Taliban,” (Kabul, Tolo News, 2016).

as a legitimate security provider but also suggests that Moscow has made an agreement with the Taliban to ensure the security of its offices.

Furthermore, Moscow is keen on maintaining its diplomatic interactions with the Taliban. Moscow planned to hold official peace-talks with the Taliban led by Russia on September 4<sup>th</sup> 2018 without Kabul's cooperation. Sebghatullah Ahmadi, a spokesman for the Afghan government told *Deutsche Welle* that "A peace process can only be initiated and brought forward by the Afghan government."<sup>157</sup> Kabul's displeasure at Russia's diplomatic gesture led Moscow to postpone the talks. However, Russia hasn't signaled its abandonment of the Taliban and will likely continue to support the Taliban.

Much to the dismay of the Afghan government, Russia arms the Taliban to counter ISKP and the United States' efforts in Afghanistan. Russia, like China and Iran, is a third-party actor that is prolonging the current conflict in Afghanistan. Like China, Russia's role in in the current conflict is limited to arming the Taliban and occasionally lending it political support.<sup>158</sup> Russia as a third-party actor, intervenes in the war by strengthening the Taliban to advance its own interests at the cost of weakening the credibility of the government in Kabul.

## **China**

### **History of Afghanistan-China Relations**

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<sup>157</sup> Rebecca Staudenmaier, "Afghanistan will not attend peace talks with Taliban in Moscow" (Bonn, Deutsche Welle, 2018).

<sup>158</sup> Justin Rowlatt, "Russia 'arming the Afghan Taliban', says US," (London, BBC, 2018).

On January 20, 1955, the People's Republic of China and the Kingdom of Afghanistan established diplomatic relations. The relationship between both countries were cordial as China sought to bolster its economic ties with Afghanistan. However, in the 1960s, as Pakistan's relationship with Afghanistan soured, the Afghanistan-Pakistan border was closed. The closure of the border hindered the fruition of the economic relations between Kabul and Beijing.

However, in 1964, the political landscape in Afghanistan changed significantly. Free speech and political parties were legalized by the regime in Kabul as Afghanistan was going through a period of modernization. Regional powers utilized this opportunity to establish proxy networks in Afghanistan. To that end, China funded the Shola-e-Jawid party, a political party sympathetic to the ideas of Mao Zedong.

In 1973, as Afghanistan's period of modernization came to an end, Kabul's diplomatic ties with Beijing declined as Kabul sought closer ties with Moscow, Beijing's rival. As per Moscow's request, the Afghan government banned the Shola-e-Jawid party and further alienated Beijing. However, Beijing remained in contact with the Shola-e-Jawid party as the party transformed in to an underground movement.

Nearly five years later, in 1978, as the Soviet Union installed Taraki in power, the Soviet-backed government in Kabul became hostile to China. As a result, Beijing encouraged the Shola-e-Jawid party to engage in subversive activities. However, as the Shola-e-Jawid party weakened, China shifted most of its resources to assisting the Mujahideen's resistance of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

During the Taliban's rule of Afghanistan, Beijing's ties with Kabul strengthened unprecedentedly. Beijing sought an amicable relationship with the Taliban. As a result, the Taliban pledged to shut down the Uighar militant training camps in Afghanistan. In November 2000, Lu



Shunlin, China's ambassador to Pakistan, was the first government official from a non-Muslim country to secretly meet with Mullah Omar.<sup>159</sup> Due to China's friendly relationship with the Taliban, Mullah Omar promised that he would never allow the Uighar militants to use Afghanistan's territory to plan and launched attacks against China. Moreover, according to Anders Corr, an expert on terrorism, "In the late 1990s, China promised to support the Taliban diplomatically at the U.N. in exchange for assistance against Afghan extremists targeting Chinese interests."

Furthermore, during the Taliban's reign, China was economically invested in Afghanistan. The Taliban's regime in Afghanistan marked the first time in Sino-Afghan relations that a large Chinese company invested in Afghanistan. The *Washington Times* reported that Zhongxing Telecom (ZTE) and Huawei Technologies, two Chinese companies, operated in Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

However, in 2001, the Taliban's regime was toppled. As the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan was established, Hamid Karzai was announced as the head of the government in Kabul. The following year, in 2002, China re-established its officials ties with Kabul.

### **China's role in the current Afghan conflict (2001-Present)**

Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, China's official ties with Kabul is mainly economical. As the Chinese Communist Party derives its domestic legitimacy from economic growth, China is keen on expanding its economic outreach. In Afghanistan, China is the third largest trading partner. According to Corr, "Chinese companies, including MCC, Zijin

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<sup>159</sup> Andrew Small, "China's Man in the Taliban," (Washington D.C., Foreign Policy, 2015).

Mining Group Company, China National Petroleum Corporation, and Jiangxi Copper Corporation, are seeking to extract billions in minerals from Afghanistan.”<sup>160</sup> Beijing has invested in various economic projects in Afghanistan. Most prominently, China has invested in Mes Aynak, the largest foreign investment project in Afghanistan’s history.

Mes Aynak is the second largest copper deposit on Earth. In November 2007, Kabul granted a 30-year lease for the Mes Aynak site to Metallurgical Group Corporation (MCC) and Jiangxi Copper, Ltd, (JCL), two Chinese state-owned companies. China, one of the largest importers of copper will greatly benefit from this project. Experts estimated that China’s profit from the Mes Aynak project will far exceed its initial \$3 billion investment.

Although the project is delayed due to logistical issues related to the contract, a security guarantor is required to advance the work of the project should the logistical issues resolve.<sup>161</sup> Mes Aynak is located in Logar, a remote and volatile province. It is a province that frequently comes under the Taliban’s attack. Beijing understands that Taliban is not only a reality in Afghanistan but also a real force that could potentially harm its economic interests. Therefore, China maintains cordial ties with the Taliban while maintaining friendly ties with Kabul. For China, it’s more convenient to work with the Taliban to pursue its economic goals instead of resisting against it. Due to the cordial relationship between the Taliban and China, the Taliban has given China the green light to proceed with the developments of the project. In 2016, the Taliban announced that they are committed to protecting the Mes Aynak project along with other projects that benefit states that have cordial ties with the Taliban.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Anders Corr, “Sanction China For Its Support Of Taliban Terrorists,” (New York City, Forbes, 2017).

<sup>161</sup> Mohsin Amin, :The Story Behind China's Long-Stalled Mine in Afghanistan,” (Washington D.C., The Diplomat, 2017).

<sup>162</sup> Sabera Azizi, “The Taliban’s Pledge to Protect National Projects is Delusive” (Kabul, Khaama Press, 2016).

The Taliban's support for China in Logar province has led to Chinese support for the Taliban in other volatile provinces. In 2016, Abdul Jabar Qahraman, the chief commander in Helmand province, said that "All say China is innocent, but all explosives to Taliban come from China. Taliban's laser and heavy weapons proves that China is involved."<sup>163</sup>

China, as a third party actor in the current conflict, not only supplies the Taliban with weapons but, it also supports the Taliban politically.<sup>164</sup> China's political support for the Taliban is due to its all-weather friendship with Pakistan.<sup>165</sup> Islamabad is heavily invested in the Taliban to further its interests in Afghanistan and the region. Therefore, China as a reliable ally of Pakistan, supports Islamabad's pro-Taliban policy.

China supports Pakistan's pro-Taliban policy on the international level. Last year, Mahmoud Saikal, Afghanistan's Ambassador to the U.N., called on China to use its influence to deter Pakistan from harboring terrorist groups that pose an existential threat to Afghanistan. However, China hasn't convinced Pakistan to change its policy of supporting the Taliban. Rather, China supports Pakistan's pro-Taliban policy. In September 2017, at the BRICS Summit, Narendra Modi, India's prime minister, called Pakistan the "mother ship of terrorism" and said that "This country shelters not just terrorists. It nurtures a mindset. A mindset that loudly proclaims that terrorism is justified for political gains." However, China immediately responded to Modi's remarks and rejected India's claim. Instead, Hua Chunying, a spokesperson of the Chinese Foreign Ministry, rejected Mr. Modi's statement and said that China "Is against linking any country or religion with terror and asked the world community to acknowledge Pakistan's great sacrifices." Contrary to China's statement, not only is there an increase of consensus amongst members of the

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<sup>163</sup> Baees Hayat, Sami Jahesh & Zackrya Sahari, "China Supports Taliban in Helmand: Afghan Official" (Kabul, Ariana News, 2017),

<sup>164</sup> Stephen Adams, "Chinese weapons 'reaching the Taliban'," (London, The Telegraph, 2007).

<sup>165</sup> Huma Sattar, "China and Pakistan's All-Weather Friendship," (Washington D.C., The Diplomat, 2015).

international community that Pakistan has an over-arching role in the Taliban's insurgency, but Sartaj Aziz, Pakistan's former foreign minister's, acknowledged the influence that Pakistan has over the Taliban. China's refusal to acknowledge Pakistan's intimate links with groups like the Taliban signals China's support for Pakistan's policies.<sup>166</sup> Moreover, China's support for the Taliban on the international level led it to advocate for the removal of the Taliban's leaders from the United Nations Security Council's sanction list. Similar to Beijing's diplomatic support to the Taliban in 1990s, China still plays an active role in the council by resisting the placement of the Taliban's top leaders in the United Nations Security Council's sanction list.<sup>167</sup>

Furthermore, China's support for Pakistan's pro-terrorism policy isn't only due to its alliance with Pakistan, it's also strategic. Beijing's support for Pakistan's pro-Taliban policy stems from its desire to pursue its own economic interest in the region. As history has shown, any economic activity between Kabul and Beijing can only happen when Pakistan's border is open. China understands that like in the 1950's if Afghanistan's relationship with Pakistan deteriorates, China needs to maintain its friendly ties with Pakistan to not only discourage it from closing its border with Afghanistan, but to also expand its economic outreach westwards. China is compelled to appease Pakistan by supporting its pro-Taliban policy due its own geostrategic interests.

Corr noted in the *Forbes* that, "In China's Faustian bargaining with the Taliban, China increases the Taliban's diplomatic profile and...appears to have strengthened and re-focused Taliban violence ever more tightly" at the cost of weakening Kabul's credibility.<sup>168</sup> The Taliban's periodic visits to China has angered the Afghan government. According to *Voice of America*

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<sup>166</sup> Rishi Iyengar, "Pakistan Has Finally Admitted That Afghan Taliban Leaders Are Living There," ( New York City, Times, 2016).

<sup>167</sup> "Russia, China, Pakistan Call For End To Sanctions Against Taliban," (Kabul, Tolo News, 2016).

<sup>168</sup> Anders Corr, "Sanction China For Its Support Of Taliban Terrorists," ( New York City ,Forbes, 2017).

(VOA), “The Afghan government has shown its displeasure over reports that a Taliban delegation visited China, saying Beijing should not provide a platform to groups that are involved in the killing of Afghans.”<sup>169</sup> Despite Kabul’s dismay, Beijing will continue to maintain its official ties with Kabul while strengthening its covert ties with the Taliban to further advance its economic and geostrategic interests.

### **Recommendations: Afghanistan’s Way Forward**

In the 1990s, as Afghanistan was in 5<sup>th</sup> phase of the conflict, Lakhdar Brahimi, United Nations Special Envoy for Afghanistan from 1997-1999, reported to the United Nations that in order to end the conflict in Afghanistan, there should be greater international pressure on Afghanistan’s neighbors to cease aiding the Taliban.<sup>170</sup> In the current phase of the conflict in Afghanistan, regional sponsorship of the Taliban play a crucial role in strengthening the Taliban’s insurgency, hindering the stability of Afghanistan, and lengthening the war. In Afghanistan’s current political theater, the Afghan government along with the international community is seeking to end the conflict by inducing the Taliban to enter peace-talks with Kabul.

In David E. Cunningham’s study, “Who Should Be at the Table?: Veto Players and Peace Processes in Civil War,” he demonstrated that successful peace-talks include the participation of veto players and the absence of non-veto players. Since, veto-players have the ability to unilaterally run a war, their approval in a negotiated settlement is required to bring lasting peace.<sup>171</sup> The

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<sup>169</sup> Gul Ayesha, “Kabul Slams China Over Reported Taliban Visit,” (Washington. D.C., Voice of America, 2016)

<sup>170</sup> Rashid, *The Taliban*, 66.

<sup>171</sup> David E. Cunningham, “Who Should Be at the Table?: Veto Players and Peace Processes in Civil war,” ( University Park, Penn State Law, 2013).

absence of non-veto players is necessary in peace-talks because their participation reduces the chances of reaching a negotiated settlement. This is so because an increase in the number of actors would require further negotiations on additional interests that are at stake, thereby reducing the probability of reaching a settlement.

In the war in Afghanistan, Pakistan is a veto-player. Pakistan's participation is required in the peace-talks to end the war in Afghanistan. Although, the Taliban is the main actor fueling instability in Afghanistan, the Taliban isn't a veto player. The Taliban doesn't have the ability to unilaterally run its insurgency. The Taliban, a group that lacks popular support, is very dependent on the sponsorship of regional players to continue its insurgency. Not only does Pakistan's ISI play an indispensable role in the Taliban's military operations but Pakistan also garners fighters to strengthen the Taliban's insurgency.<sup>172</sup> Without Pakistan's support the Taliban are incapable of running its insurgency.<sup>173</sup> With or without the support of the Taliban's leader, the Taliban's insurgency flourishes due to Islamabad's support. Mullah Rahmatullah Kakazada, a key member of the Taliban admitted the group's dependency to the *Guardian*, stating that, "If we left Pakistan we would not survive one week." The Taliban's insurgency would dismantle in a very short-span of time without Islamabad's support. Therefore, successful peace-talks require the participation of Pakistan, not the Taliban.<sup>174</sup>

Furthermore, Washington and the international community has mainly expended most of its resources on improving the counter-terrorism capabilities of the Afghan Armed Forces. While

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<sup>172</sup>Rishi Iyengar, "Pakistan's 'University of Jihad' Just Received \$3 Million in Government Funds," (New York, Times, 2016).

<sup>173</sup> Matt Waldman, "The Sun in the Sky: The Relationship Between Pakistan's ISI and Afghan Insurgents," ( London, Crisis States Research Centre, 2010).

<sup>174</sup> Sabera Azizi, "Pakistan is Responsible for the Corpses in Afghanistan," (Washington. D.C., the American Conservative, 2018).

the defensive and counter-terrorism capabilities of the Afghan government have inflicted damages to the Taliban, it hasn't crushed the Taliban's insurgency nor has it discouraged regional players from supporting the Taliban. To end the war, the international community and Washington should place greater focus on the sponsorship of the Taliban by regional players. Washington and the international community should raise the costs for regional players that pursue a pro-Taliban policy. Through a carrot and stick approach that is catered to addressing the different interests of these regional players, the international community and Washington could raise the incentive for these regional players to abandon their support for the Taliban.

## **Conclusion**

The current intrastate conflict in Afghanistan is multifaceted. Domestic and external factors are attributed to the war. Although there are multiple parties involved in the war, this paper examines the destabilizing role that regional states from the Asian continent play in the Afghan war.

While there are many reasons why external states intervene in a conflict, the war in Afghanistan confirms not only Cunningham's, Lindsay's, and Enterline's study, but it also confirms the overall realist notion that external states intervene in a conflict on the basis of interests. External states calculate the costs and benefits of their intervention to advance its respective national interests. While the discussed regional states play a devastating role in the Afghan war, these regional players continue their destabilizing role due to strategic calculations based on the costs and benefits of fueling the conflict by supporting the Taliban.

As a weak actor, the Taliban is highly dependent on regional players to sustain its insurgency. By using the five regional states as case studies, this paper examines the role that Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Russia, and China play in the war in Afghanistan. These case studies confirm the notion that the intervention of external states exacerbate a conflict. This study confirms my hypothesis that the support of regional states to the Taliban is the fueling and lengthening the war in Afghanistan. These regional states deem it in their interests to support the Taliban.

The case study on Pakistan proves that in the Afghan war, Pakistan is a veto-player. Pakistan as a veto player, has significant interests to fuel the Taliban's insurgency. In confirmation with the findings of Cunningham (2006), Pakistan's status as a veto-player that supports the Taliban's war efforts, is a key factor that is hindering peace in Afghanistan. Also, this paper confirms the study of Cunningham (2010). Pakistan's intervention in the war in Afghanistan is to pursue its own agenda that is mainly irrelevant to the goals of the internal fighting Afghan parties. Cunningham's study proves that the pursue of a separate agenda by an external state greatly increases the duration of an intrastate conflict. Likewise, Pakistan's sponsorship of the Taliban is aligned with its own interests in Afghanistan that is irrelevant to the agenda of the domestic Afghan actors. Pakistan's pro-Taliban policy has led to the lengthening of the war in Afghanistan.

Moreover, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Russia, and China are third-party actors that utilize the momentum of the Taliban's insurgency ignited by Pakistan to further their own interests. Although these countries' roles aren't as extensive as Pakistan's role, these countries still play a significant role in the conflict. The involvement of Iran, Saudi Arabia, Russia, and China in



Afghanistan confirms the study of Regan (2002): third party interventions tend to increase the duration of intrastate conflict Regan.

Furthermore, the assistance that Iran, Saudi Arabia, Russia, and China provide to the Taliban confirms Lindsay's and Enterline's finding that third-party actors intervene in a conflict to advance their own respective interests (Lindsay and Enterline 2002). According to Lindsay and Enterline, such intervention, on the basis of interests, extends the duration of an intrastate conflict. In Afghanistan, third-party intervention by Iran, Saudi Arabia, Russia, and China has led to the intensification of the war.

These regional states support the Taliban because it's an easier means to attain their respective interests. In other words, regional sponsorship of the Taliban is not a costly policy for these regional states. This paper confirms Salehyan's finding that, external states support rebel groups because its less costly than directly engaging with its rival (Salehyan 2011).

Given the interests that regional states have in supporting the Taliban, it's very unlikely that these states will abandon its support for the Taliban. In that light, the preliminary steps towards ending the war in Afghanistan requires regional abandonment of the Taliban. To reach this end, regional players need to be induced to abandon the Taliban.

To end the conflict in Afghanistan, Pakistan's presence as a veto-player is required in the peace-talks. Moreover, to reduce the destabilizing role that regional states play in the war, the international community needs to make it costly for regional players to pursue a pro-Taliban policy. Otherwise, the international community's current approach, mainly dedicated to improving the counter-terrorism capabilities of the Afghan government will not change the course of the war.

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