

The conflict in Afghanistan from the Great Powers' Perspective

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[APPLICANT'S NAME, DATE]

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Abstract

The strategic location of Afghanistan has been the focus of great powers since the 19th Century. Before the World Wars, the Soviet Union and Great Britain were engaged in Afghanistan, followed by the Soviet Union invasion in 1979. The country has been a battlefield of wars among the regional powers, creating decades of instability. 9/11 and its aftermath once again attracted the attention of the great powers, however the nature and complexity of the Great Powers rivalry in Afghanistan has changed overtime. This time they are fighting a more problematic war, against the potential threats of extremism, terrorism and drug trafficking. The current participants of interest are Al-Qaeda, Taliban and Islamic State. US and NATO forces withdrawal from Afghanistan without militarily, politically and economically stabilizing the region has provided an open field to Al-Qaeda/Taliban and IS in one hand and on the other hand, created a vacuum and will be cause of temptation for the regional and world players.

Introduction

When considering war, nations generally invoke four different types of interests to justify their use of force: vital interest, strategic interest, stability interest, and moral/ideological interest (Jakobsen, 1998). *Vital interest* refers to the defence of the homeland, for example the US intervention into Afghanistan post 9/11 attacks. *Strategic interest* refers to the preservation of an acceptable balance of power, be it global or regional. To prevent areas outside the homeland of great economic and strategic importance from falling into the wrong

hands and to protect the access to important raw materials and trade (US involvement in Europe during both World Wars). Thirdly, *Stability interest* is related to the preservation of stability in countries close to home. This interest may induce governments to threaten and use force in order to reduce their destabilizing effects, such as economic breakdown, refugee flows, agitation, and terrorism among expatriate groups and the spread of the conflict. Lastly, *Moral/ideological* interest is related to the protection of values and ideas concerning world order, principles of international law, systems of government, and human rights (Benard, et al. 2007).

Research Questions

- i. Why Afghanistan, a landlocked, backward and impoverished country is focus of attention for the great powers?
- ii. What caused the US and NATO to withdraw from Afghanistan?
- iii. Why is the US withdrawal attractive to Russia and China?

Using these four types of interest to understand why Afghanistan is of attractiveness, we investigate the perspective from the Great Powers. Afghanistan is in a very strategic location, which acts as a link between Central and South Asian regions, and provide access to vital gas, minerals and oil resources. The location links Indian Ocean with Heartland of Eurasia and has continually coaxed great powers for competing with each other (Karim, 2017). Afghanistan, thus, has been the battleground for the world's powers for decades.

Wars even stem back to when imperial interests of Russia competed with the interests of British Empire in the so-called "Great Game" of the 19th century, and since Afghanistan was situated between these two great powers, Afghanistan thus had to act as a buffer between the Russian and British interests (Morgan, 1973). Since then, many wars (*Cold War, Soviet Invasion, War on Terror*) have sought Afghanistan as their battlefield, regularly due to its convenient location.

In Addition to the convenient location of Afghanistan, weak government, nonexistence of communication, health, education and administrative infra-structure attract, time and again, attention of the world powers (Goodson, 2014).

Great Powers - Current Perspective

United States Retreat from Afghanistan

Statements of the Bush Administration after 9/11 shows that three of the four types of interests outlined above are perceived to be at stake. Their *vital interest* was to prevent another 9/11 Al Qaeda attack. Their *strategic interest* was to Prevent regions (Afghanistan and Pakistan) from falling in the hands of the Taliban and Islamist terrorists. Finally, their *moral/ideological* interest was to build democracy, enhance human and especially women's rights; part of a new ideological struggle against Islamist militants (Benard et al. 2007).

As the US and NATO (*North Atlantic Treaty Organization*) forces began to withdraw from Afghanistan, the number of terrorist attacks increased and since 2015, Taliban has made major gains in Afghanistan. Suicidal attacks have increased, and they have also made numerous territorial ingresses across the country (Ahmadzai, 2016). As of March 2017, over 20% of Afghanistan was under the control of Taliban, rates of casualties increased heavily, and important state's building and institutes including the supreme court, Parliament House, and military bases became targets of the terrorist attacks (Mattis, 2017).

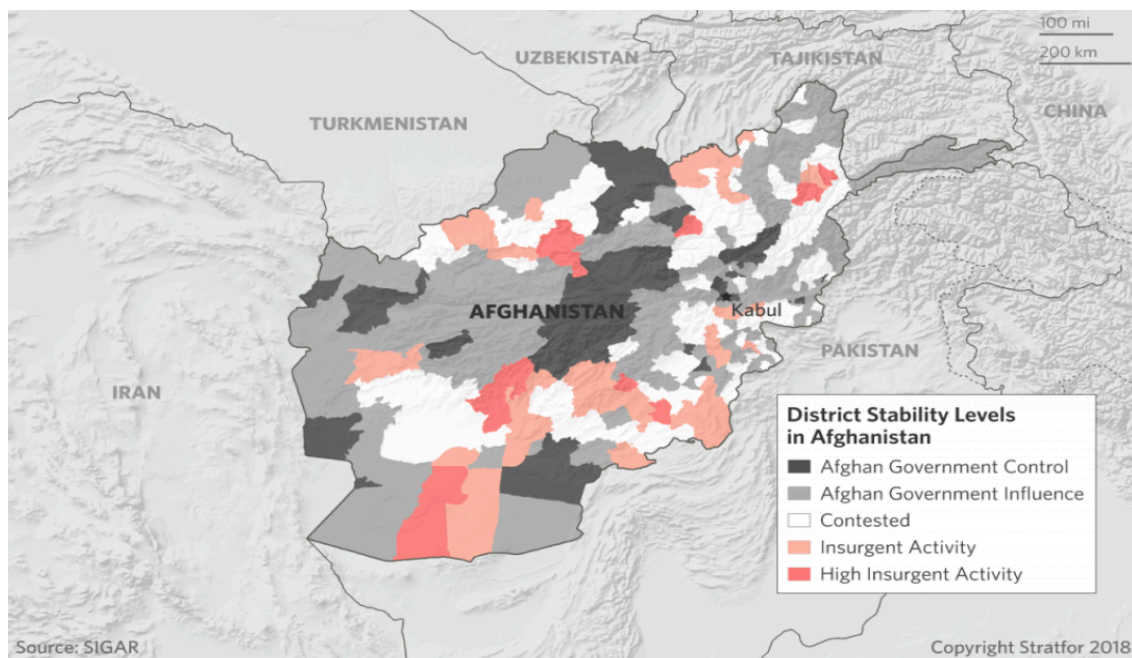


Figure 1- Afghanistan District Stability Levels

Source – SIGAR, 2018

Assumptions are that Afghanistan is no more a focal point for the U.S and it is likely to shift its attention toward other rising challenges in Middle East and East Asia. US security challenges include increasing assertiveness of China in South and East China Seas, Russia's regaining control in Crimea, North Korea's provocations, and threat pose by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (Kiram, 2017).

The inability of the United States, together with its NATO allies, to bring peace and stability to Afghanistan, has provided an open field to Al-Qaeda/Taliban and Islamic State in one hand and encourage regional and international players such as Russia (Saikal, 2017) and China on another.

Russia's expansion interest into Afghanistan

Russia's interests stem in large part from concerns about Afghanistan. The advent of the Islamic State's Khorasan chapter in 2015 stoked Russia's fears of the transnational extremist group using Afghanistan to launch attacks into Russia's Central Asian periphery (Stratfor, 2018).

Furthermore, Russia has three main objectives in Afghanistan. One is to see a stable friendly Afghanistan, so that the former Soviet republics, are not affected by Afghan instability. Another is to limit the growth of the narcotics trade from Afghanistan, the largest producer of heroin in the world, to Central Asia and Russia. And the third objective is to expand Russian influence in the face of the declining US military involvement in Afghanistan. The US drawdown has opened an important arena for competition between different regional powers, leading to claims of a new "great game" between Russia and the US (Saikal, 2017).

Russia is attempting to realign its interests in Afghanistan, engage with the Taliban and forge a strategic partnership with China and Pakistan. Russian's attempts are motivated by a sole objective of confronting the United States where it is possible. China and Russia are heavily involved Central Asia as they have an abundance of natural resources (Karim, 2017). War on terror has provided a common ground for Russia, China and Central Asian countries to work together.

China's expansion interest into Afghanistan

China is also enhancing its influence in the region and is playing a leading role in getting Afghanistan and Pakistan closer to stabilize Afghanistan. China has three main interests in the region – firstly, to curtail separatist tendency in the western Xinjiang province, where the separatist groups are naturally inclined to take strength from the Islamic groups in the region. Secondly, China really wants carbon resources of the central Asian states to fulfil needs of its 1.3 billion population and for its economic modernization. Thirdly, China is interested in economic and trade deals in the region (Winbush, 2011).

China's initial involvement in Afghanistan at the start of the war was limited to resource extraction, including a \$3 billion agreement to develop the Mes Aynak copper mine 40km south-east of Kabul. Prospects of persistent Afghan instability after the NATO drawdown in 2014 has awakened China into playing a more active role. China is using its diplomatic heft to push for talks between Afghanistan and Pakistan, and between the Taliban and Kabul.

Additionally, China has also invited Afghanistan to join the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which is rumoured to even include a proposed military base in the Wakham Corridor. Regardless of the rumour, China's expanding diplomatic and economic profile means it will be forced to establish a local security presence. Afghanistan seems like a logical starting point considering their ability to disrupt neighbouring Belt and Road Initiative projects and the ability of Uighur militants to use Afghan territory to plot attacks in neighbouring Xinjiang province.

Conclusion

Geographic strategic location, weak government, tribal division, and absence of worthwhile communication/administrative infrastructure in Afghanistan repeatedly attract major powers' attention. Event of the 9/11 could best be described as the blowback of U.S. Cold War policies towards Afghanistan. After the withdrawal of allied forces from Afghanistan, struggle among the major regional powers might increase for gaining influence which is likely to lead to another civil war. In Afghanistan, the geopolitical tensions inherit in great power competition mean that coordination on resolving the conflict will be intermittent, as the war goes on.

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